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February, 1983

A MATTER of THIN AIR

by Lawrence Treat



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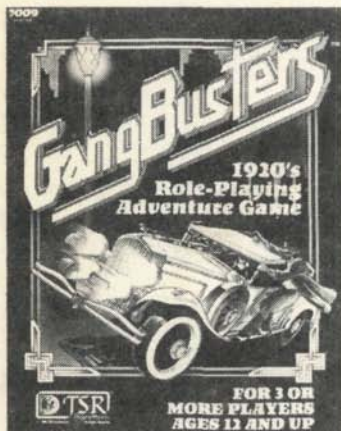
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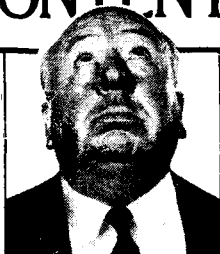
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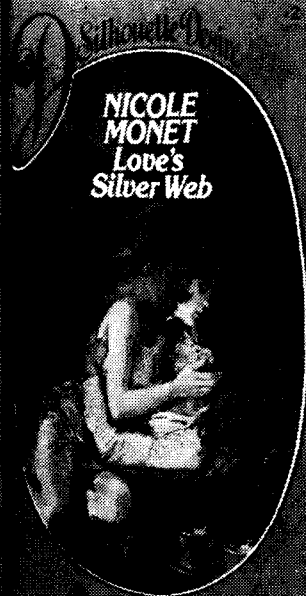
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We have recently returned from Bouchercon XIII, the thirteenth annual world mystery convention, attended with considerable enthusiasm by mystery fans and such professionals in the field as mystery writers and editors. And we can recommend it highly to those of you who haven't before been to a Bouchercon (named after Anthony Boucher, author and mystery critic for the *New York Times*) and who might find it interesting. The convention moves around to a different part of the country every year; this year it wound up in San Francisco, Dashiell Hammett's town. The guest of honor was Robert B. Parker, creator of the Boston private eye, Spenser, and much of the doings were concerned with private eyes and the hardboiled style. There was, of course, a Dashiell Hammett panel on the schedule, and the Private Eye Writers of America, a newly-organized group just completing its first year of

existence, gave their first annual awards. Art Scott put on an entertaining slide show called "The Babe on the Paperback Cover," in which he demonstrated the changing styles and motifs of that unforgettable art form, and several of the films shown almost continuously throughout the convention were hardboiled classics. In addition, there were such events as a Sherlock Holmes panel, a discussion with California mystery writers, a panel on the horror story, and one on "The Current State of the Mystery." A dealers' room was set up, with a number of dealers in rare and used mysteries offering a wide variety of titles for sale in both paperback and hardcover, and a San Francisco Mystery Walk was outlined in the program, for those who wanted to retrace Hammett's footsteps around town and through his books.

The above-mentioned Private Eye Writers of America

awards were given in three categories. A Life Achievement Award, "The Eye," went to Ross Macdonald and was accepted in his absence by his long-time friend and colleague Dennis Lynds. Nominees and winners (the latter in bold face) for the other two awards were:

BEST PRIVATE EYE HARDCOVER NOVEL OF 1981: **Hoodwink** by Bill Pronzini (St. Martin's); *A Stab in the Dark* by Lawrence Block (Arbor House); *30 for a Harry* by Richard Hoyt (M. Evans); *Hard Trade* by Arthur Lyons (Holt, Rinehart & Winston); and *Early Autumn* by Robert B. Parker (Delacorte).

BEST PRIVATE EYE PAPERBACK NOVEL OF 1981: **California Thriller** by Max Byrd (Bantam); *Carpenter, Detective* by Hamilton T. Caine (Charter); *Brown's Requiem* by James Ellroy (Avon); *The Old Dick* by L. A. Morse (Avon); and *Murder in the Wind* by George Ogan

(Raven House).

Next year, we are told, there will be at least one additional award, for best short story. In the meantime, those persons interested in joining PWA are very much encouraged to do so. Professional private eye writers should send a check for \$15, the 1983 dues, to Robert J. Randisi, Vice President, PWA, 1811 East 35th Street, Brooklyn, New York 11234. Nonwriters or those writers who don't write about private eyes may apply for non-active membership by writing to Mr. Randisi for an application. Upon approval, their dues will be \$10. Membership entitles one to a membership card and the newsletter, *Reflections in a Private Eye*, but only active members may vote or run for office.

Next year's Bouchercon will be held in New York—as always, over the Columbus Day Weekend.

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Lois Adams**, Associate Editor; **Ralph Rubino**, Art Director; **Gerry Hawkins**, Associate Art Director; **Ron Kuliner**, Art Editor; **Carl Bartee**, Production Director; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Iris Temple**, Director, Subsidiary Rights; **Barbara Bazyn**, Manager, Contracts & Permissions; **Layne Layton**, Promotion Manager; **Michael Dillon**, Circulation Director, Retail Marketing; **Randy Silverman**, Circulation Manager, Subscriptions; **Rose Wayner**, Classified Advertising Director; **William F. Battista**, Advertising Director (New York: 212-557-9100; Chicago: 312-346-0712; Los Angeles: 213-785-3114).

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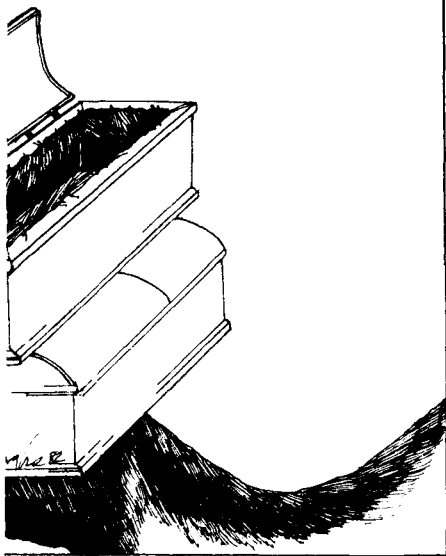
A Matter



Illustration by Ken Boroughs

Of Thin Air

by
Lawrence
Treat_____



It was pure coincidence that a week or two previously Chief Willy Wharton of LePage County had happened to drive by just when a car had been stopped for a traffic violation. That was when he first noticed them—two chattery, protesting women falling all over themselves with explanations. The traffic blocked them

from his view, but he could hear their protests.

A truck had gotten in their way, a dog had run out in front of them, the sun had been in their eyes, they'd merely followed another car coming out of the driveway. Excuses spilled out of the pair of them like a paddlewheel churning up river water.

There was no reason why they meant anything to Willy, and he soon forgot about them.

When Julian arrived, Willy was luxuriating in the orthopedic chair that Kate had given him for his last birthday, and the knock on the door startled him.

He said, "Come in," and an underfed little man with light blue eyes and a scrawny beard the color and texture of wet hay stumbled in, almost fell on his face, and had to grab the edge of the desk for a prop.

"Sorry," he said. "Lost my balance."

"That's okay," Willy said. And with the gesture of somebody handing out a free ticket for the Superbowl, he said, "Sit down. What can I do for you?"

"Name's Julian Arbell," the man said, and he stammered for a second or so before he managed to blurt out the rea-

son for his visit. "Pa's missing. Disappeared. Into thin air. Like that." He waved his arms as if he were trying to semaphore.

"Arbell?" Willy asked. "The Amos Arbell who lives over in Ottoville—that your father?"

"Was," Julian said. "I came all the way from Richardville to run him a funeral he'd be proud of, and where is he? Gone. I got the coffin, but what's there to put into it? Nothing!"

"You're an undertaker?" Willy said.

"Me? Not on your life!"

"Then why the coffin?"

"Got a bargain. Water damaged and real cheap, so I bought two of them. One for my wife, one for Pa. Saves me two hundred dollars, cash."

Willy put that one in the back of his head, where he stuck off-beat ideas that made no sense. Man's got a coffin, and consequently he kills somebody so he can use the coffin.

"What makes you think your pa's dead?"

"Phoned and said so."

"Look," Willy said. "If he was dead, how could he phone?"

"Pa could do anything."

Willy scowled, took a deep breath, and humped himself up in his chair, more or less like a sleepy tiger stretching.

Julian got the signal.

"Well," he said, "he didn't ex-

actly tell me he was dead. Said they were killing him, and what Pa says, is."

"Who's they?"

"Florry. Minnie."

"Who are they?"

"Wife. Her sister."

"Did you ask them about your pa?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"They're gone, too. Empty house."

"Maybe they all went away on a trip."

"Not together. Hated each other. They been trying to kill Pa for years, but botch it every time."

"You were fond of your father?"

"Nope."

"When was this, when he called to tell you they were killing him?"

"Week ago Tuesday."

"Why'd you wait so long?"

"Blues."

"I don't get it."

Julian tugged at the seventy-eight or so hairs of his beard and got no satisfaction out of it. "Blues," he said.

Willy humped himself up again and made as if he'd take a deep breath and blow Julian clean out of the window. "Blues," Julian said again. "That's our school team. Going into the finals. Got to support them."

As a good American dedicated to law and order and the sanctity of team spirit, Willy couldn't dispute the premise. "Have you been to the house?" he asked.

"Just come from there. Nobody around except Casper. Caretaker. Been there twenty years, but not very bright."

"I think I'd better go see the place," Willy said. "Come along, we'll take my car."

On the way, Julian gave him a rundown of the Arbell history. "Pa made a fortune," Julian said. "Lumber business, Oregon. Ma died there. Left Pa pretty lonesome, so he married her nurse. Florida. Comes from a family that name all their children after the states. Brother's Tex. Ken's another brother. Kentucky. Minnie, she's Minnesota. She moved in as soon as Florry got married."

"Any servants in the house?"

"Dunno."

"Does your father have any friends?"

"Nope."

Casper met them at the house. A product of junk food and packaged dinners, Casper had a forty-inch waist and size forty-eight pants, which he held up by a kind of waddle and an occasional hitch with his left hand. He unlocked the door as if he were selling his birthright, and

half price at that.

As Willy told Kate that evening, the joint looked baronial, full of uncomfortable chairs and expensive stuff that belonged in a museum. There was an archway between the cathedral-ceilinged living room and the banquet room, which Amos probably called a dining room, and a full suit of armor stood there to guard it. Just to make sure that Amos wasn't inside, Willy flipped up the visor. Amos wasn't.

With that settled, Willy got down to business, which was mostly snooping around and noting things like the silverware in the dining room and the dog bed in Amos's room and the mail that had piled up inside the front door.

The absence of the dog bothered Willy. Questioned as to its whereabouts, Julian said, "What dog?" And Casper scratched his chin and said, after thinking it over, "Dunno."

In the evening Willy went over the case with Chief Dan Moorhead, his counterpart in Morgan County. Although the two counties were in separate states, they had a common border along which stood the Right Side Bar & Grill, so named because it was on the right side of the state line, where liquor taxes were lower. There, by cus-

tom, the first booth on the right as you came in was reserved for the two chiefs, who usually met around eight in the evening and talked business.

There were certain similarities between them, and certain differences. While they ran to about the same longitude, for instance, Willy was spread thinner and had less bulk. The main difference between them, though, was internal. Dan's knowledge was encyclopedic and he stayed up nights reading technical treatises on anything from viruses to the infinite extent of the universe. Willy, however, was happily married and devoted his spare time to enjoying the existence of Kate.

When he got to the bar that evening, Dan was already there. According to ritual, Willy waited until after the first beer before broaching anything except the basic amenities. At the proper time he stated his problem.

"Got a vanishing act," he said. "Man named Arbell has evanesced." Willy liked the word and lingered on it before repeating what Julian had told him. "That's all I knew until I started looking around the house," Willy said.

"And then what?" Dan asked, looking as if he'd been brought up on vitamins and buttermilk.

"Then I looked in Florry's

desk. Sort of interesting, too."

"Hepplewhite?" Dan said.

"Hepplewhite?" Willy asked.

"Where does he come in?"

"You were describing the desk," Dan said.

"Well, I was going to tell you what was in it, which wasn't much. Some unpaid bills and a cash statement of what she spent for running the house, and Amos didn't give her much. A real miser, if you ask me. So where was the dough?"

Dan was willing to play straight man once in a while. "Where was it?"

"In the same bank that Amos always used, only his account was closed out. Phil Jameson, he's the manager. Had a shot at the Chicago Cubs a few years ago, but couldn't make it."

"He told you where she was?"

"In California. And she has a brand new account, in her own name, and there's fifty grand in it."

"Makes sense," Dan said. "She got hold of his money and then killed him and ran away." Dan grinned. "With the bank manager."

"Phil Jameson," Willy said, "has a good job, a fine wife, four children, and he plays third base on the Ottoville softball team. Why would he run away with a pair of forty-year-old sisters?"

"We were talking about the dough," Dan said. "How did she get hold of fifty grand?"

"Power of attorney, and everything's strictly kosher. I checked. She has been selling Amos's stock and putting the proceeds in her own name. Half a million so far, and another half to go."

"Find the body and get hold of Florry," Dan said. "Willy, it looks like you got yourself a homicide."

"Maybe," Willy said. "Anyhow, I found out that Florry is staying at the Beverly Hills out in L.A., so I called her and she said she was okay where she was and she didn't know anything about Amos, but she and Minnie were having a great time and didn't expect to come home yet, and then she hung up on me. Dan, she seemed too damn sure of herself."

"Any idea when she's coming?"

"Tomorrow. I called her right back and told her this was a homicide investigation and—well, after I told her a couple of other things, she allowed as how she'd take the first flight she could get, which turns out to be tomorrow night."

Willy was there in plenty of time. He figured that, after a couple of changes of

planes and with a police investigation to worry about, the sisters would be pretty tired when they finally got to the LePage airport. He was wrong, however. They looked chipper, and they practically skipped down the stairway from the plane.

He spotted them right off. Florry was all cushions, even her face was like a small, pink pincushion, but if she was pure cotton, Minnie was made of emery cloth. No soft spots in her, and Willy had the feeling that if he bumped into her, she'd rub the skin off.

He walked straight up to them and introduced himself. "I'm Chief Wharton, and I thought we might sit down for a while and talk about—"

Florry opened the barrage. "It's so nice of you to meet us. I didn't think policemen were so polite and—" Minnie finished the sentence: "Nobody's been nice to us. We almost lost our bags and one of the handles was broken." Whereupon Florry got into the act again. "We don't want to bother you with our troubles, but what about Amos?" And Minnie chimed in, "You got us so worried about him. Do you know where he is?"

They went at it like that, presto, staccato, never letting up, never answering a question and never stopping their ava-

lanche of words. When Willy wanted to know when they'd last seen Amos, Florry said it was after the Bob Hope show last Wednesday, but Minnie said that wasn't Wednesday, it was Thursday, and Florry said it didn't matter, it was the time he'd said Shakespeare used Mobil oil, whereupon Minnie said that wasn't Shakespeare, it was Shelley, and Florry said Shelley who, and they argued about that for a while and finally agreed that Amos would probably show up when nobody expected him, all he was doing now was making everybody worry and spend the taxpayers' money looking for him when he'd gone off somewhere and forgotten to tell anybody where he was going.

Willy realized that, far from being tired, they were building up to a peak of energy. He also realized that they'd probably rehearsed their act and that they enjoyed baiting him.

They fielded the matter of the dog as if they'd been expecting the question. Florry said, "That awful dog!" Minnie said he bit people, and the two sisters began arguing about how many times he'd bit the postman, and then they disagreed as to whether he was an Alsatian or a shepherd or a police dog, and what was a police dog and how

much did it cost to feed the dog and was he a good watchdog and what kind of dog they had when they were children.

Willy gave up and managed to mention Julian, whereupon the sisters went to work taking Julian apart. They were full of the injustice of how he'd inherit everything under his father's will and how Florry wouldn't get a cent. Willy knew all about that, he'd checked with the Arbell lawyer and knew that she'd signed a pre-marital agreement and had gotten ten thousand dollars. She kept saying she'd spent it long ago and didn't know what she'd do now.

Willy told himself he knew damn well what she'd do. In fact, she'd done it already. She'd grabbed all the money available, and she was interested in getting hold of the rest of it. Willy admitted freely that he'd been out-manuevered, out-generated and certainly out-talked, so he sent the sisters home in a taxi while he drove back to the peace and quiet of Kate.

"I made a mistake," he told her. "They ganged up on me, but wait till tomorrow when I get Florry alone."

Florry was on the phone, however, shortly after he got home. "Mr. Wharton? This is Mrs. Arbell and somebody got in the house and stole every-

thing, so you'd better come here right away and do something."

"Nothing I can do now," he said. "Don't touch anything, and I'll be around in the morning."

"I'll touch anything I want to because this is my own house, and I want you to come here immediately."

"Tomorrow," Willy said, and hung up. And when the phone rang a few seconds later, he took the receiver off the hook.

Still, all things considered, he wished he had this kind of a larceny investigation a little more often. Although Florry heckled him and Minnie piled it on, Willy had the whole business solved right off. First, he noticed that neither the door nor any of the windows had been forced, which meant a key had been used. As for the key, Julian had his own, so Willy figured he'd either drive up to Julian's or get in touch with the police there. Chances were, there wouldn't be much trouble. Julian would have the loot and would probably admit it.

Just to make sure he was right, Willy found Casper, who told him Julian and his coffin had been there yesterday afternoon, and that he'd filled up the coffin with something or other. Casper didn't know what.

When Willy returned to the

main house, Florry was trying to put the knight together. It looked as if Julian had taken it apart, but had decided that the pieces were too bulky to bother with. Florry was trying to fit the tassels together and getting them mixed up with a cuisse, so Willy told her to forget about it, he'd fix it up for her, he was an expert on armor and he'd get around to it after he'd recovered the rest of the stuff and restored whatever had been taken.

"But how do you know where it is?" she demanded, and her eyes got big with curiosity or wonder, or maybe she just made them big for Willy's individual benefit.

"I know," he said, "so stop making a nuisance of yourself." And that left her silent and she just gaped, maybe for the first time in her life. Even Minnie looked impressed. Still, shutting Florry up for a few minutes didn't help him get places with a homicide investigation, and the best he could do was tower over her and watch her wilt and then walk off and tend to other business.

The most important other business was getting hold of Julian and having a heart to heart talk with him, but Willy could just as well have stayed back in his office in Forsyth. Julian merely repeated his be-

lief that Amos was dead. Under his will everything belonged to Julian, so Julian had loaded up a few of his own possessions and brought them home, and what was wrong with that?

The net result was that Willy was a little late in arriving at the Right Side Bar & Grill that evening. "Thought you weren't coming," Dan said. "What happened?"

"Been busy," Willy remarked, and signaled to the bartender. "I," he announced, "am stumped." He waited for Dan to object, and when Dan didn't, Willy heaved a sigh just deep enough to blow a couple of paper napkins off a nearby table. Then he stated his problem. "I've got a moron, an amateur undertaker, and a pair of non-stop talking females, so what do I do with them?"

"Wait them out," Dan said. "People who talk too much give themselves away."

"Not these two," Willy said glumly. "They been practicing up all their lives, and they don't make mistakes."

"Tail them for a day or so. They'll do something stupid. Always happens." Dan, however, spoke with less than complete conviction. He was saved from going into the matter when Tony, at the bar, yelled something over the noise of the crowd.

Dan interpreted it for Willy.

"Tony wants you," Dan said.

Willy turned around. "Yeah?" he said. "What's the trouble?"

Tony motioned and got nowhere. Then he took a deep breath and let out the full power of his voice. It ripped through the crowd like a bull charging through a cornfield, and in simple admiration for his lung power, the room went silent. Tony then spoke in a normal voice. "Phone," he said.

Willy got up and marched over to the corner of the room, where Tony handed him the receiver. "Chief Wharton here," Willy said into the receiver.

A man's voice answered. "If you want to find Amos Arbell, try the R.W. Nursing Home." And the phone clicked.

Willy returned to his table and sat down. "Funny the way your mind works," he said to Dan. "As soon as the guy said nursing home, I remembered an incident that happened a couple of weeks ago. Maybe less. I was stuck in traffic and this car came barreling out of the place and almost rammed a police car. The cop started bawling them out, only the women in the car turned the blame around and made out it was his fault. His or somebody else's. Anyhow, they talked themselves right out of that

ticket, and I can hear them right now. Those voices, I don't know how come I forgot them, because they belonged to Florry and her sister Minnie."

"Then whoever called you just now knew what he was talking about."

"Maybe," Willy said. "I'll find out in the morning because if Amos is really there, he'll keep, and I may as well give him a good night's sleep. And the same to me."

He got to the nursing home a little after nine and identified himself to a big, thick-lipped manager named Moriarty. Moriarty drummed one square-nailed finger on an unpaid bill and was probably thinking of all the violations Willy could dig up, but when Willy stated his business, Moriarty was all smiles and acted like a men's wear salesman telling a customer how well he looked in that jacket.

Arbell?, Moriarty kept saying. Amos Arbelle? Sure, he'd been admitted there about ten days ago. Came with his wife and sister, and they'd paid for a full month in advance. Did Willy want to see Arbelle's record? Everything was in order. Regular medical exams every day. Not that Arbelle needed them. A little senile, sure, but otherwise he'd been in good

health. No need to worry about him. He'd been okay when he left.

"Left?" Willy exclaimed. "He's not here?"

"Left yesterday. As a matter of fact he sneaked out, so I phoned his wife and she said not to worry, it was okay, don't bother and don't bring in the police, she knew where he was. Not that I had any obligation to notify the authorities, but we lean backwards to take care of our clients."

Willy digested the news and saw that the case was more mixed up than ever. In fact, there was no case at all. Amos was senile and Florry had put him in a nursing home and gone to California, after putting most of his money in her name. Which she had a perfect right to do. As for Julian, he'd bought a coffin and wanted to get some use out of it, and when his father wasn't home, Julian decided he was now an orphan and had inherited the estate. And the only thing wrong was why Florry hadn't told this to Willie in the first place. And since she hadn't—

Willy, thinking hard and checking off all the possibilities, did what any cop would do under the circumstances. He reached into his pocket and took out a picture of Amos Ar-

bell. Just to make sure. Just in case.

"Him?" Willy said.

Moriarty shook his head. "Who's he? Because I never saw him before in my life."

"That's Amos," Willy said, "and your customer isn't." And Willy stood up, wondering if Florry had outsmarted him. But whether she had or not, Willy had a full day's work ahead of him.

He was jubilant when he walked into the Right Side Bar & Grill that evening and sat down opposite Dan.

"Well?" Dan said.

Willy, who liked to be cryptic, outdid himself. "The dog did it," Willy remarked. "Or at least he started things off." And that was all Willy said until after the ritual of the beer had been completed. Then Willy explained the dog.

"It was a male named Priscilla," Willy said, "and everybody hated it except Amos. What happened was that it took a bite out of Casper. Here." Willy rose up in his seat and tapped his behind gently. "And Casper got mad and slugged it with a crowbar. But a guy like Casper, it's easy to break him down and tell when he's lying."

"Was he?" Dan asked.

"No. He told me exactly what had happened, and he was glad to get it off his chest. After he killed the dog, which Amos liked a lot better than he liked his wife, his son, and his sister-in-law combined, Casper just stood there with the crowbar and he was still standing there when Amos came along. When Amos saw the dog, he flipped and lit into Casper and gave him a shove, which Casper found a little hard to take. Like he said to me, first he got bit and then he got bawled out for getting bit and then he got pushed around. It was all too much for him, and he made a pass at Amos with the crowbar."

Willy grimaced. Dan said, "So who's in the nursing home?"

"Florry's brother, Tex. She had it all figured out long ago. She'd thought of all the things that could happen and how she could take advantage of them and she'd been wondering how to get rid of Amos without his will going into effect. So when Casper killed him and asked her what to do, she said bury Amos and don't tell anybody. Just bury him far away, somewhere in the woods where nobody can find him.

"She was pretty sure of Casper. He was too dumb to realize what he'd done and he'd forget about it, so she put her plan

into effect. First of all, she entered Tex in the nursing home, but under the name of Amos Arbell and with instructions to act senile and take a walk after a week or so. That way, Amos's existence would be fully documented, nobody would think of looking for his body, and Florry could forge her power of attorney and get to work helping herself to his assets. And it all would have worked—there would have been no reason in the world to investigate, and I would never even have heard of the Arbell problem—except that Julian bought a couple of coffins and persuaded himself that Amos was dead and that his death was a police matter. Which changed everything. Florry had to stall me off, keep me away from Casper, and make me think that Amos had been in a nursing home and disappeared from there. I wasn't supposed to go into anything previous to that disappearance."

"Did you get a confession?"

"Me?" Willy said. "When I accused them and tried to get a description of Tex so we could get hold of him, Florry said he had brown eyes and Minnie said they were green, and Florry admitted there was some green in them. When I questioned them separately, they gave me

contradictory descriptions. I think they had it figured out ahead of time. Florry said he was six feet tall and was blond, Minnie said he was five six and had brown hair. Around that time, I had me an inspiration. I turned them loose on an assistant D.A."

"They can't hold out forever," Dan said. "If a guy keeps at

them, he's bound to break them down. They're accessories after the fact. Or at least Florry is, so how's she going to get out of that?"

"Maybe she won't," Willy said, "except that there's still one little problem. No *corpus*. Casper took the body out somewhere and buried it, but he can't remember where."

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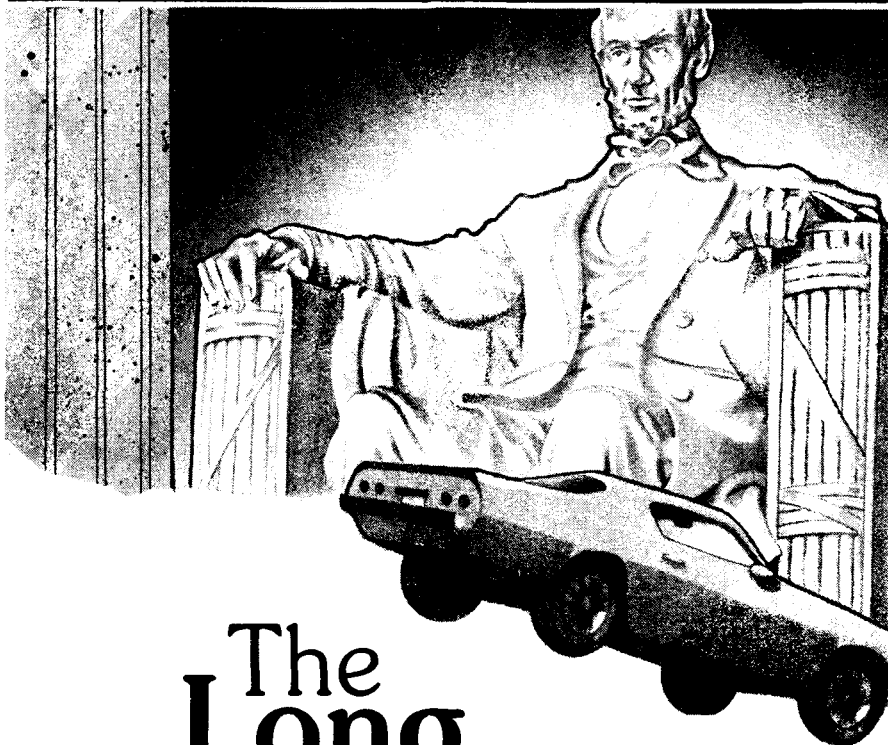
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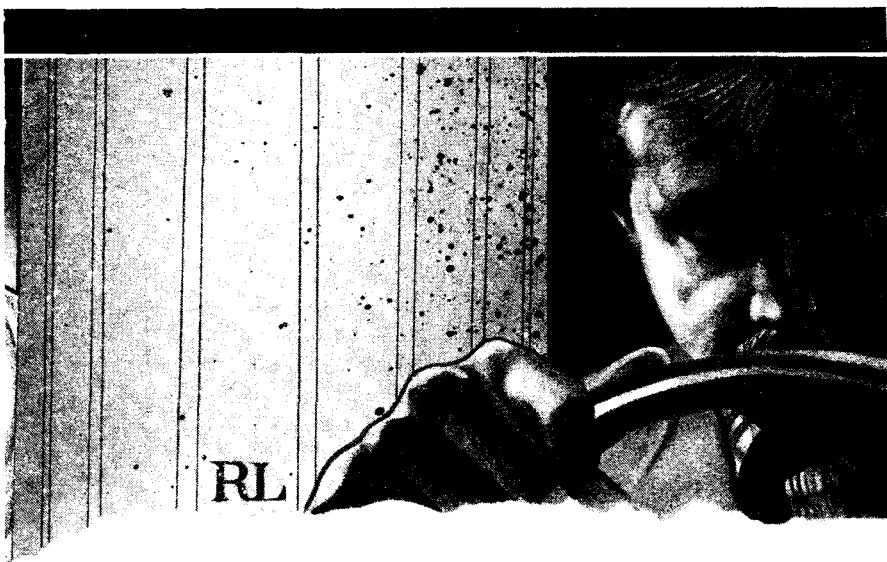
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FICTION



The
Long
by **Slow Dive**
T. Robin Kantner

Illustration by Ray Lago



“It’s strange seeing you in daylight,” I said.

Karen smiled as she walked toward me across the lawn. Her face was a mixture of embarrassment, bravado, and — something you see a lot of in my line of work — desperation. Well, considering what had happened between us, and only a week ago at that, she must have been desperate to come and see me.

Anyone other than Karen

would have been turned away that day because I was up to my elbows in that sacred rite of Michigan spring: car cleaning. My blue ’71 Mustang, top down and gleaming, sat in the lush green lawn of the Norwegian Wood complex. I was in cutoff jeans and T-shirt, bucket and sponge and scrub-brush and squeegee handy, thoroughly washing the dreck of a long, cold winter out of the interior. I had some Springsteen on the

tape player, was feeling smug and righteous at the thorough job I was doing, and didn't particularly want to see anybody. But when Arn, the security guard, had called to announce Karen East, I'd had him let her pass.

"Hello, Ben," she said in her low, husky voice. She was dressed—just a trifle early—for summer, in white shorts, navy blue sleeveless top, and sandals. Her rich black hair was neatly combed in a pageboy cut, and apparently she'd gotten a head start in the tanning area, too; I saw a hint of it on her arms and legs and face. It made her dark eyes and sensual mouth even more desirable. When she reached the car she turned and effortlessly hoisted herself up onto the hood, legs dangling. Few people get away with that; Karen was on the list. She asked quietly, holding up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun, "You mad at me?"

I was bent to my task, washing crud off the dashboard. "Who, me? Nah."

"I had to do it," she said quietly. "It was you or Burt. And Burt always comes first with me, no matter what."

Yeah, yeah, I thought grimly, not looking at her. Soap opera stuff.

"I'm sorry," she said earnestly.

I squeezed the sponge out into the bucket, set both down on the grass, then got out of the car, propped myself against the door on the passenger side, and lighted a cigar, taking my time. "You come all this way to say that?"

She looked at me uncertainly, then said all in a rush, "I need your help. I don't know who else to . . . I guess this was a mistake." She trailed off and slid down from the car, as if getting ready to leave.

"Wait a minute. What's wrong?"

She looked back at me. Her dark, alluring eyes were misty. "Something's wrong with Burt. I don't know what. But I'm scared. He won't tell me anything. He—"

"Hold it, hold it," I said, extending my hands with palms facing each other, my cigar smoldering in my teeth. "You want to *hire* me? Is that it?"

She said defenselessly, "You said you do investigations."

"I check up on things, I scout around, I look into matters. For money, of course."

"I have money," she said in a small voice, looking down.

I'd known her three months but had never seen her like this. Something very bad was going on, or at least she thought there was. Half disgusted with myself, I said, "I get two fifty

per day plus expenses, but we'll argue about that later. Tell me what you know."

She leaned against the hood as if suddenly very tired. "I don't know much," she said anxiously. "Just . . . he's working a lot of hours. Doing a lot of traveling. Doesn't tell me about his business any more. Little stuff—like he carefully throws away his plane ticket voucher copies now instead of leaving them strewn on the vanity. He's got a brittle, excited, preoccupied edge to him. I don't know but—he won't tell me about whatever it is—and—"

"Maybe he's got another woman. That'd be ironic as hell."

She plunged on. "And there's the money."

At last, something interesting. "What money?" I asked, puffing smoke.

She shook her head, bewildered. "Cash money, lots and lots of it. It's in an old five-gallon gas can in the garage. He cut a hole in the bottom and stuffed it with cash. I didn't—I left it there—but I think there must be a hundred thousand dollars in there."

I smoked. "What was his explanation?"

"I found it by accident. I didn't ask him." She laughed weakly. "Too scared, I guess." Her mouth trembled, as she looked away from me. "He

makes good money, but nothing like that, no way."

"Listen," I said sharply, determined to level. "I could look into it, but you might be better off not knowing. You thought about that?"

She steadied. "I can take it, whatever it is. I want to help him. We'll work it out together."

The other problem was, of course, that when you take on a case with a personal side to it, you don't operate with a clear head. But I was in my usual semi-desperate financial state, playing the float, moving payments around, fighting to keep the wolves at bay. Aside from a couple of small corporate retainer arrangements, my investigating work comes through word of mouth, and business had been lousy. My preference would have been to send Karen on her way, but my preference was secondary, as it usually is. I said, "Okay, I better get some facts. Burt into horses? Poker? Vegas?"

She reflected. "No. We went to Las Vegas once but he hardly gambled at all. Seemed bored. Lost twelve dollars in the slots. Really disgusted him."

"Drugs?"

"He takes maybe two, three aspirin a year."

There went the obvious theories, I supposed. "Where does

he work?"

"Chrysler's," she said off-handedly.

I'd seen his picture at their house. "Corporate, I suppose?"

"No, no. Army Tank Automotive Command in Warren."

This division builds a product you don't see Ricardo Montalban advertising on TV. I stifled a smile as a possible commercial occurred to me: "Zee tank, boss! Zee tank!" I fingered my cigar, examined the smoldering end, and asked, "What's he do out there?"

"I don't know exactly. He says it's classified. I've got his card here." She pulled out a thin billfold that was tucked in the waistband of her shorts and extracted a card. "Chief, Audit Staff, Strategic Systems," she read.

She might as well have read me a hieroglyphic. I straightened and faced her. "Okay," I said, "I'll give it a go."

She put the card back in the billfold and came out with some currency. Our hands touched briefly as she handed me five hundreds. She said, "You're a prince, Ben," then turned and walked away across the lawn.

I watched her, the excellent figure, the erect young body, my mind flashing back to a dark bedroom and the excellent figure without clothes. And thought, no, kid, not a prince.

Just a plain old working lug, greedy for money. And for something else, too, but there was no point in thinking about that now. Or ever, probably.

Three days later, one hot early summer afternoon, I was on board a Northwest Orient DC-9 bound for Washington National Airport.

Not that the time in between had been particularly exciting. Don't let anybody kid you, this work is ten percent action and ninety percent utter, stultifying boredom. Burt East's routine, up to boarding the plane, had been just about as exciting as watching somebody get a haircut.

To work in Warren and back. Stops at the cleaners, the grocery, and the bank. Occasional lunches out. I practically lived in the Mustang, fighting to keep my eyes open and my butt from going numb, eating cigar smoke and radio for lunch, going bloodshot from keeping my eyes on the tail of East's brand-new black LeBaron as I followed him all over hell-and-gone. In the meantime I carefully put the word out for information on him from various sources, and came up empty. So, to find out anything, I was going to have to do it the hard way. Figured.

The flight was fine, the land-

ing particularly exciting. Washington, bisected by rivers, appeared below. The DC-9, rather than doing the long slow dive, dropped like a Stuka bomber, barely skimmed the waves of the Potomac, and touched the runway just at the edge of the river. Typically, once taxiing began, most of the passengers of the full flight jumped to their feet and then stood in cramped, crowded silence for long minutes until the aircraft arrived at the gate. I remained seated, pretending to read an in-flight magazine, until East shuffled past me; then I dropped the magazine and disembarked.

By then I knew him like my own reflection. He was a broad, chunky man with short blond hair, a wispy mustache, and a pudgy, slit-eyed, mama's-boy face. He wore a light blue suit today, which meant he only looked like about ninety-nine percent of the other businessmen on the flight. I kept him in sight as we walked the jammed, hot, dark concourse toward the terminal. I had to play this just right or I'd lose him here.

Once in the terminal, he didn't go to any of the car rental counters; instead he went into a tiny gift shop/newsstand and, glancing occasionally at his watch, appeared to be browsing among the magazines. I took

the opportunity to go to the car rental counter and sign off on the car I'd reserved from the Detroit airport before boarding the plane. I had no problem at all, except that I had no credit cards and had to fork over a hundred dollar deposit. Further, I'd specified a Ford Motor product, but they had misunderstood completely and had given me something else. Something that wasn't much.

I'd just finished transacting my business when East strolled out of the newsstand and toward the long, crowded taxi line at the front of the terminal. I barreled out the doors past him and trotted down to the lot to collect my car. By the time I got the seat adjusted and the motor started, East was climbing alone into a cab. I screeched out onto the driveway, wedged my way into the traffic, and moved up toward East's taxi.

I'd never been to Washington and didn't know from National Airport, so I got up as close as I could to East and stayed there. The cab was a creaky, half-rusted Chevrolet Impala, mostly white once. We curved around on the horseshoe-shaped road until we got to the George Washington parkway, and jumped north on that.

It was a divided road and I fell back a bit, staying well within striking distance of the

cab. It was smothering hot in Washington, but rather than reduce what little power the rental car had, I left the air conditioning off and rolled down a couple of windows instead. We passed an exit that said Center Bridge; to the left was a peaceful blue lagoon and to the right, across the Potomac, I could see the Jefferson Memorial, looking tranquil among drifts of cherry blossoms. I shortened the distance between me and the cab, keeping in the right lane, until we got to the Arlington Memorial Bridge and swung right to cross the river.

Traffic slowed to a crawl. I was about eight cars back from East. Dead ahead was the Lincoln Memorial; beyond that I could see the top of the Washington Monument and, way off in the distance, the Capitol. The cab bore left, then swung right onto the access road that circles the Memorial. We pulled around to the front of it, the cab stopped, and East climbed out.

Somehow I didn't think he made this weekday afternoon trip to Washington to meditate on the Great Emancipator. I passed the cab and looped the massive Memorial completely. There weren't many people around; those who were stood mostly in reverence at the front, snapping pictures of the enormous statue inside, and of each

other. I noticed with interest that East's cab pulled about a hundred feet away to the driveway that ran by the still, mirrorlike reflecting pool, and parked. I was headed farther east toward the Washington Monument, and saw in my rearview mirror that East had strolled up the steps of the Memorial and appeared to be gazing at Lincoln's statue. By the Washington Monument, I did what was probably an illegal U-turn and doubled back.

The cab was still there, the driver reading a magazine. East moved away from the front of the Memorial to the row of marble columns at the right. Suddenly he wasn't alone any more. He was talking with a squat, chunky man wearing a dark raincoat. I lost them momentarily as I circled the Memorial again. Back in sight at the north side, I saw East heading down the stone steps, arm beckoning in the air. His cab had come to life again and was headed back for him. The squat chunky man was walking the other way, north toward a big avenue that seemed to run into the heart of the city. That's when I noticed that he carried a briefcase virtually identical to East's.

Now what?

East boarded his cab. The squat man was making for a

line of cars parked on the big avenue. I was headed away from both of them, back along the drive by the reflecting pool again. Quick decision time. Good chance, I decided, that East was going straight back to National—and Detroit. Why else keep the cab? I'd never find out what this strange trip was about unless I got a line on the man

was waiting fat and pretty as he came toward me. He turned north on Twenty-third; I gave him a piece and then fell in behind him.

It was rush hour, meaning that the traffic was slow. We slogged north on Twenty-third, with me so close to the Continental that I was practically breathing his exhaust. I had a

She shook her head. "Cash money, lots and lots of it—in an old five-gallon gas can in the garage."

he'd met. I didn't think about it further. I kicked the accelerator. The engine broke wind with a rattle of piston-slap and, probably because the road was level, picked up speed. East's friend was now walking along the cars on the eastbound side of the avenue, which meant he'd have to come toward me. I went down to where I'd U-turned before, swung north, and passed the Washington Monument. Across the verdant lawn and reflecting pool I saw the man get into a maroon Lincoln Continental and putt out onto the avenue. I stopped at the corner—names at last: Twenty-third and Constitution—and

map that the rental people had given me, but the mosquitoes type was impossible to read while driving, so I had to crowd the Continental as best I could and hope he didn't pull any fast ones on these unfamiliar streets. We passed a lot of government buildings about which I'd probably have been impressed as hell had I known what they were.

One thing was familiar, though. Washington, like Detroit, is built around circles. We got to one—I glimpsed George Washington University—and swung around it and onto New Hampshire Avenue. Traffic moved a bit better there until

we got to the next circle, whatever it was, crept about three hundred degrees around it, and then north—sort of—on Connecticut Avenue. Now we were moving, and the traffic was lighter. I kept a couple of car lengths between me and the Continental. If he was watching for a tail, he didn't show it.

I damn near lost him, though, when he hung a hard right on Belmont Road. We went a couple of blocks and he pulled into a nondescript, two story office building on the left. No company name or ID, just the street number: 2552. I kept on going, looking for a place to turn around, and instead came to where the road dead-ended at Nineteenth Avenue. There was a park right across the street, so I pulled into it and started to double back.

I never made it. A gray, shiny Plymouth compact jumped out of nowhere in front of me. Another car slid with a screech behind. I gripped the wheel and looked around. Men in suits appeared on both sides of the car, and the one at the driver's window hung a little wallet open in front of my face.

If I hadn't been so curious—and, let's face it, worried—I'd have found the situation humorous. How many ex-factory rats get a per-

sonally escorted visit to the FBI Building on their first visit to Our Nation's Capital?

But I didn't think about that as they dragged me downtown to the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building. It looks a little like the late director himself: stone-faced, bigger than life, slit-eyed; add the jowls and you're there. They parked me in a big, comfortable conference room, at a broad oak table, mind swirling with the random pieces of this disjointed puzzle, instead of thinking through some kind of act or cover story.

The two agents—Dorn, an inspector, athletically built, curly haired and intense; and McGee, a taller, redhaired man—sat on either side of me. Dorn had a manila file folder in his big hairy hands. It was stuffed with pages of green-barred computer printouts. He skimmed through them, slid the file over to McGee, and said to me, "We've come across you before, Mr. Perkins."

"Yeah, a while back. Can I smoke?"

He shrugged. I lighted a short, cork-tipped cigar. McGee, leafing aimlessly through the file, said softly, "How is your old boss these days?"

"Still in your country club in Lewisburg, far as I know. He was my boss, not my buddy."

Dorn made a tight, dry smile. "That was your story the last

time, but your close-mouthed routine won't work now. Back then you were just a material witness. Now you're hip deep in national security. So talk."

"Mind telling me what it's about?" I asked mildly.

McGee fixed me with icy gray eyes and said, "Tell us how you're involved with Burton East. Right now."

I didn't think it was any way to treat a first-time guest in Washington, but I overcame my indignation and proceeded to sing like a bird. I gave them the whole story except for my personal relationship with Karen, which didn't strike me as material. The agents listened glumly and didn't ask any questions. Dorn, the senior man, sat back with a thump against the back of his chair. McGee glanced at him and said, irritated, "This is just what we need. An hysterical bitch bringing some Detroit low-life into the act."

Dorn asked me, "You're not even licensed, are you?"

I tipped my head, shrugging, and said, "I help people out sometimes."

McGee said urgently to Dorn, "I think this guy goes on ice for a while."

Dorn gave his partner a cautioning look. To me he said implacably, "We could, you know. Park you between four walls

someplace and lose the file for a few weeks."

I said sincerely, "Consider me genuinely threatened, please."

He squinted, perhaps trying to remember if borderline smartass is a federal violation. "So," he said softly, "you lay off East, *and* his wife, and everything else even remotely connected with them. Understood?"

"Absolutely," I said, and meant it. I'm no hero.

Disgusted, McGee said, "So he promises! You taking the word of an ex-union goon?"

Eyes still on me, Dorn asked, "Got anybody who can vouch for you?"

I've got friends on all sides of the street. I thought for a minute and then gave him the name of Inspector Dick Dennehy, who's with Special Investigations in the Michigan State Police. The agents left the room for a few minutes and I waited, stretching and smoking and scratching and in general entertaining whoever was videotaping me from behind the fake mirror on the end of the conference room wall.

Dorn came back in alone. "We'll drop you off at your car," he said in a neutral voice. "You get back to Detroit and forget the whole thing."

I got to my feet and, perhaps foolishly, asked, "Mind giving

me some idea of what the whole thing is that I'm forgetting about?"

"Classified," he said, taking my arm and leading me out.

It was dark by the time I got back to National. I booked a flight for Detroit, then killed some time sitting in a lounge thinking about the situation. I was stymied, I figured, and pretty effectively; still, though, regardless of the circumstances, there's this thing in me that just has to *know*. I had to silence the voice, but good. I had to quit wondering what East was up to, and how the FBI was involved. I'd already decided it was no coincidence that they bagged me by the park at Belmont Road. I was sure they'd been following me—and, by definition, East—all the way from Detroit. The fact that I'd spotted no tail meant nothing. Government guys are good and, besides, you usually don't look for a tail when you're tailing someone yourself.

Before boarding the plane, I went to a pay phone, called my home number and triggered the answering machine to give me my messages. The first was Dick Dennehy. He was laughing. "Hey, how'd you get yourself tangled up with fibby? Give me a call and tell me the story.

This is a riot. But, seriously, if the federales are into any action around here, I need to know about it. Got to stay abreast of the competition, you know?"

The second message was from Norris Johnston, and he seemed amused, too, in his dry, scholarly way. "Ben, better stop by and see me tomorrow. One of my little matters has unexpectedly headed in your direction. I'd like to do you a little professional courtesy. Heh heh."

Just about perfect, I thought sourly. This FBI/East/Dennehy situation was bad enough, but Norris Johnston meant real trouble. I boarded the plane and sulked all the way back to Detroit.

As I pulled into the littered, cratered gravel parking lot behind Johnston's building in east Dearborn, a silver-blue Datsun 280-Z nearly plowed into me on its way out.

I parked and stepped out into the unseasonably hot early summer sun. The Z spun wheels in reverse and roared dramatically back to me. A young, darkhaired, crewcut man jumped out and stormed around the front of his car. He wore a light brown suit with an open-necked white dress shirt, and his expression was furious. "You

almost front-ended me, you big moron!" he bellowed as he approached me.

He was tough looking, but young. I was not at all in the mood for entertainment today. I grunted, "That's all right. Just be more careful next time." I turned my back on him to walk around the building toward Michigan Avenue. A strong hand grabbed my shoulder, and he spun me around and against the dirty brick building. To this clumsy, stupid approach there are about eleven or twelve ways to respond, and, feeling particularly peevisish that morning, I chose one of the more painful ones. I simply leaned back against the wall, braced myself on my left foot, and gave him my right knee smack between his legs. He belowed and folded, his face showing utter surprise as all the strength went out of him. I caught him as he fell and gave him a good hard shove back into the hood of an old leaning Plymouth parked there. He was panting, his face screwed into a spiral. I said quietly, "You got to learn to pick your patsies better, buster."

"I'm—" he said weakly—"I'm a private investigator, bozo. You'd better—"

"Oh my! A real live PI? You wouldn't be Joe Mannix, would you?" Then a thought occurred

to me. I jerked my head toward the building. "You work with Johnston?"

He nodded, gritting his teeth and glaring at me.

I let him go and stood back. He wasn't in any shape to retaliate, anyway. I shook my head and said, "Better get out of the sun before you faint," then turned and entered the building.

Johnston's second floor office must have belonged to a dentist once, one who either went broke or died. There was a high-ceilinged waiting room, littered with junk furniture and entirely too big for anybody in the detective business. It smelled like formaldehyde and pain, and was empty of people.

I opened an inner door and stepped into Johnston's office. It was small and cosy, lined with bookshelves and lighted from a dirty window that looked out on the wide expanse of Michigan Avenue. Behind the desk slouched Norris Johnston, feet up on desk, reading the *Detroit Free Press*.

He pulled his lanky legs down and smiled at me. Norris Johnston looks like anything but a PI. He's tall and rawboned, with a shaggy sweep of blond hair and silver-framed glasses. His big round head is still and tense; the rest of him hangs bonily down like a marionette.

His big toothy smile is secretive and knowing and almost always there. He wears good clothes—today it was a gray suit, complete with vest, the sleeves of his blue shirt rolled up, and his jacket was flung over one of the chairs in front of the desk. You might take him for an unpublished English professor or a failing manufacturer's rep. He looks harmless, which is an advantage in this work, and one I don't have.

He stood but didn't hold out his hand. "Ben! Sit down. Fine day."

"Little hot," I said, sitting. "Had a bit of a run-in outside. Claimed to be an associate of yours."

"Belligerent mouth? Import?" I nodded. "Well, he's young, Ben. Good help is hard to find these days. You've repeatedly spurned my offers, so what else could I do?"

I lighted a cigar and gestured lazily around the room. "I must have been *crazy* to pass up all this."

He sat back down, his toothy smile fixed. Scrabbling in the pile of junk on his desk, he pulled together a couple of pieces of legal note paper. "You're here about the, ah, problem."

"You left a message," I prodded.

"Well, it's not a big problem,

but one I feel obliged to inform you about, as one 'colleague' to another."

"Go on," I said in a neutral voice.

"Yes. Well," he glanced over his notes again, "I was employed about three weeks ago by a client who suspected his wife was having an affair and wanted me to identify the, ah, culprit."

"Sounds like fun," I said casually, squinting at him. Couldn't be.

"Yes. Seems a neighbor got a partial plate on the perpetrator's car. I ran with that but, of course, it takes time to match up partials with make / model / year. Nevertheless, I succeeded. It turned out to belong to a 1971 Mustang convertible. Blue."

I swallowed. Real hard.

The toothy grin was even wider as he looked up at me. "You do, of course, know who I'm talking about."

"Guess so, yeah."

"My client," Johnston said reflectively, leaning back in his chair, "is a rather strange, intense man. He sat right there, exactly where you are now, and lectured me about how much he loves his wife. Seems he wants to buy her a new house in Franklin Village. Talked about the 'moves' he's making to, ah, make things right, as he put it.

He rambled on at great length. Truly obsessed with her. The idea that she could seek . . . entertainment . . . elsewhere, enraged him no end. But not at her. At the, ah, perpetrator."

Quelling my emotions with effort, I said, "So you gave him a report?"

His eyebrows shot up. "No, no! I've told him nothing. Of course I'm going to bury the matter. I'll give discouraging reports for a couple of weeks, then suggest that we end the inquiry. That is, assuming the relationship does not, ah, continue."

"No problem."

"Well. Fine, then! Consider it done. A courtesy from one professional to, ah . . . someone in the same line of work. Fair enough?" He leaped to his feet happily and reached a hand out to me. I rose and shook hands with him.

"Fair enough, Norris. Listen." I puffed on my cigar, watching him through the smoke. "This fella tell you anything more about the 'moves' he's making?"

"No," he drawled, smile fixed but eyes icily on me. "I didn't pursue it. Frankly, I think the man's trouble. He's jumped the track somewhere, as the saying goes." He put his hands on his hips and stared up at the ceil-

ing. "Any particular reason you're asking?"

"Classified," I said, giving him a grin and turning for the door.

I've always wanted to use that on someone.

Honest, I made a valiant effort to stay the hell out of it. I really did try.

From Johnston's office I went back to Norwegian Wood and worked a while at my real job, checking up on maintenance work and taking a look at things. Then, suddenly fatigued by the twists and turns of the past few days, I repaired to my favorite grubby dark little saloon, Under New Management, and started pouring down a few.

The regular bartender, my buddy Bill Scozzafava, was off that day, but Eddie, who owns the place, brought me Stroh's and Jack at regular intervals and I sat in one of the booths, smoking and sipping, building a wall of smoke and silence around me, ignoring the few customers who drifted in.

It kept lunging back at me, in vivid detail. East was obviously chin-deep in heavy, heavy stuff. The quick, furtive trip to Washington. The meeting at the Lincoln Memorial, of all places, with a nondescript man carrying an identical

briefcase. Maybe they switched them, who could tell? The nondescript man headed up to the north part of town, went into 2552 Belmont, and the FBI landed on *me* like a ton of bricks. Then there was the hundred G's stashed in a gas can in East's garage. The Army Tank Automotive Command. Dorn's order to lay off or do ice time.

You could construct a lot of real exciting theories around these disjointed facts. But I needed more information. Fortified by a few drinks, I decided to damn the torpedoes and go after it.

I picked up my cigars and a stiff shot of Jack Daniel's and went back to the open pay phones in the dark, keg-lined hall that runs past the bathrooms. Piling my change below the phone, I lighted a cigar, dropped a quarter, and called Patty Meek at the University of Michigan library in Ann Arbor.

Patty's a grad student and works the information desk at the library. I had known her a couple of years back when her roommate disappeared and I was hired to find her. It wasn't one of my more successful cases—the kid had up and joined the Unification Church, from which she apparently didn't intend to return—but I got to

know Patty and had gotten her help in the research area a couple of times since.

She had that high, happy, little-girl voice and was glad to hear from me. "Okay, kid, a toughie. I've got an address in Washington, D.C., and I need to know what's there."

"Big white place? Columns in front? Furtive activities inside?"

"I *said* it was a toughie." I gave her the address. "What can you tell me?"

She got serious. "We don't have that resource here, Ben. City directories for most of southeastern Michigan, but nothing farther away than that."

"Point me somewhere."

She sounded disappointed. "I imagine the D.C. library would have it. Damn, wish I could help you. . . ." I let the silence grow. Sometimes all you have to do is wait, and let them convince themselves. "Listen, let me call you back. What's the number?"

I gave it, and hung up. The bar was getting more crowded—dayshift from Michigan Truck had let out—and the noise level grew from the patrons and the jukebox. Jennifer Warnes' "Could It Be Love." Johnny Lee with "Looking for Love." Alabama: "Love in the First Degree." Spring does this to people, even at Under New

Management. I paced and drank and smoked and ignored the dirty looks from visitors to the bathrooms. The phone rang and I grabbed it, knocking over a wino who'd lurched helpfully over to answer.

Patty's voice was uncharacteristically low and tense. "Belmont Road or Belmont Street?" she asked.

"Road. Just about positive."

She muttered. "I'm gonna get fed my face if my boss finds out. I've got the D.C. library on the other line. Better hang on, Ben." I listened to the dead air of "hold" for a couple of minutes. Then she was back. "I've got it," she said tonelessly.

"Super. Give over."

"Might be a mistake. Maybe you got the number wrong." She took a deep breath. "Military and Naval Attaché Office, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

"No," I said easily, "I don't think it's a mistake. Thanks, kid. You done good."

I stood there for a long time, staring without seeing anything at the chrome robotoid face of the pay phone. Then I picked up the receiver, fed the phone another quarter, and dialed. Dennehy was at home and I told him I had the story. We agreed to meet at DuGlass in Southfield. I hung up, collected my things, and headed

for the door.

In a way, I was disappointed. Karen's instinct about Burt's being in trouble was exactly right, and, with the FBI in the act, the trouble was only beginning. On the other hand, I was also elated. I'd cracked the mother, a big one. For a plain working lug who unplugs toilets for a living and does nickel-and-dime gumshoe for extra dough, this was big-time action. If nothing else, I'd make some points with Dennehy, which is money in the bank.

As I reached for the door-handle of the Mustang, the sap caught me high up on the head. A sharp blast of pain shrieked across my mind and I reached out to hug the driveway, the gravel still warm from the early summer sun.

Pain sang in my mind like a glittering curtain of chrome spikes, ice picks, and busted glass. I shifted and groaned. I was down on my back and, aside from my aching head and the fact that my left arm was hauled sharply back behind me, was not in the least uncomfortable. I blinked and looked around to find that I was in the back seat of a car, my left wrist handcuffed securely to the armrest. I could feel movement, hear the hum of the engine, the whisper of tires, the

chorus of traffic outside as we moved along.

East was driving. Otherwise we were alone. I edged myself up gently, feeling the throbbing in my head sharpen, and dared a look out the side window. After watching landmarks a moment I realized that we were headed north on Farmington Road, away from my downriver stomping grounds. I was wondering how to announce my return to consciousness — and whether I should — when East said, “Good, I was scared I hit you too hard.”

A rotten-toothed crone poked dull knitting needles into my cerebral cortex. I said to him, “Too early to tell, Burt. Now, if I get double vision and start puking all over your nice upholstery here, there may be a problem.”

“Not for me, pally,” he replied. “I’ll be curing all your problems for you, pretty quick here.”

“Now listen,” I said with a tremor in my voice that was not entirely feigned, “this is pretty extreme, don’t you think? I didn’t force myself on her, you know.” At the same time I was thinking about Norris Johnston. He was a dead man, for sure.

East made a dry laugh. I pulled at my bound hand, and the cuff bit into my wrist in re-

sponse. I wasn’t going anywhere, at least without help. East said, “Things been bad with me and Karen, but I’ve been making some moves to set them right. And they’re *going* to be right. I’m going to show her the best kind of life there is, because that’s what she deserves. And everybody that’s in the way is getting taken care of.” His voice was scratchy and uneven. Johnston was right; this guy had one oar out of the water for sure. He also wasn’t in very good control of the car. Farmington Road is two lanes north there, and he was using both. With any luck—or, I amended, with a lot of luck — some cop would notice us.

I tried to straighten and didn’t get much of anywhere. “I know all about your moves, East. Like a certain squat guy in a dark suit whom you switched briefcases with at the Lincoln Memorial yesterday afternoon.”

There was a pause as we waited for the red light at Six Mile. The sun was setting rapidly over to our right. The car lurched forward when the light went green. East muttered, “That’s one more reason to shut you up.”

“But there’s other players in the act,” I said meaningfully. “Big players. The game’s over. You’d better pick up your gas

can and hightail it to Costa Rica before it crashes in on you. Turn me loose and I'll give you the picture."

"Sure," he said tonelessly.

I hurried on, bearing down. "The FBI knows about your meeting. They know the whole deal. I talked to them yesterday. Way I figure it is, they're going to get the case locked down tight and then put you inside forever and ever, amen. Espionage is about as heavy a fall as you can take."

East laughed. Cackled is a better word. The car weaved as he leaned his head back, roaring. "The FBI! *Sure* they know, pally! I'm a *double*! I turned after the feds tumbled to the act a couple months ago. We've been feeding the Ivans so much garbage about the M-1 tank that they'll never get it sorted out!"

Oh, jeez.

East barreled on, "I had the thing scoped out. Big cash, government protection, new identities and lives for me and Karen. Then you got into the act. Come to find out you were some union goon and now you work some two-bit janitor job and do freelance strongarm, when you're not climbing up other guys' wives."

He sighed, a rasping sound that made me irrelevantly think of the dying gasp of a gut-shot

man. "What about you and her, huh? You mind explaining it to me? She's out of your league. Totally different world. Well-built hard case like you got to have droves of sleazo bimbos to choose from. So why Karen?"

There was no way to win with a question like that. Why her? It wasn't *her* in particular, anyway. It was preparation meeting opportunity. Romp and circumstance. She was ready and I was ready. I remembered the furtive meetings at her house, waiting in the freezing cold street for her to show up. I remembered the soft, eager kisses at the door as we met. I remembered pizza and beer and wine as we warmed up. I remembered talking for hours and laughing, and her telling me how "deeply in like" she was with me. I remembered showering with her after (we thought) the evening's tryst was over. I remembered the long drives back to Belleville, singing loud off-key Melissa Manchester and Bruce Springsteen to the indifferent traffic.

And I remembered the end, just ten days ago, when she wouldn't come to the phone any more. She'd told me at Norwegian Wood at our last meeting that it was her husband, that she wanted to do right by him. I think it was more than that. Even though she was married,

even though there could never be a future for us, even though she positioned herself as an adventurer, she still yearned for the Big Story: she wanted to hear me say I was lonely, that I missed her when we were apart, that she meant more to me than anyone in my life, that I loved her. Despite her image of herself as a modern, independent woman, she wanted to hear me say those things, even though all but the last would have been lies.

Thankfully, I don't think East expected me to answer him. We had stopped again, and, peering out the window, I recognized the downtown intersection of Farmington Road and Grand River. East made the left turn jerkily. The darkness was nearly complete now. I said quietly, "Listen, Burt, it all busted up a couple weeks ago. But she came over earlier in the week and hired me to find out what you were up to. She's worried about you. She knows something's wrong and she wants to help. That's it. I'm completely, totally out of the picture. Believe me, I'll never see her again."

"Believe me," he mimicked cruelly. "I'm going to make sure of that." His face was averted from me, his shoulders hunched over the wheel; he was pushing it hard and fast, faster than he

should have.

I went on in a quiet, unruffled voice, pitching the same line. It was all I had to go with. We passed a cemetery on the right. I glanced around to the left at the headlights gaining on us. It was a big sedan, drifting up on the passing lane, dark inside, solitary figure at the wheel. I turned back to East, thinking that I could maybe get him going, get him listening and reacting, get some reason working in that obsessed mind.

The bullet took him in the temple and the big .45 slug must have been tumbling by the time it got there, because it lifted him up from the bench seat and hurled him to the right, crashing against the passenger side door. The sedan next to us shot forward into the twilight. I leaped forward instinctively, scrabbling for the untended wheel. East's body, in terminal spasm, pressed on the accelerator, and the car rocketed forth, the wheel spinning free. I tore at the handcuff, in total panic, feeling the tender flesh on my wrist give, my heart clutching my throat in a fist.

The car veered to the right and hit the curb in excess of eighty miles per hour. We shot past a tall spruce tree, careened completely airborne over the neatly tended grass of the White

Motor Company lawn, and descended in a long slow dive toward the silvery flat pond.

BUY AMERICAN said the sticker on the rear bumper of East's car as it was dragged, shiny, wet, and dead, from the pond. I was soaking wet; my wrist was ripped and bleeding; my brain floated in a sea of pain, and I was in a state of blurry, strung-tight shock. I shivered, watching the wrecker tug the car out of the pond by a big hook round the rear axle. Red lights flashed from every direction, lighting up the faces of the cops and the medics and the gawkers and the rubbernecks who were hoping to see some blood. There was a low, excited rumbling from the crowd; it was party time in Farmington Hills.

Dennehy, next to me, said, "You owe me for the tab at DuGlass. That place ain't cheap."

"Sorry. I was too busy being kidnapped and shot at and damn near drowned and stuff."

Dennehy had a big square head, big flat face, grayish blond hair, and aviator glasses. He looks about as warm and reassuring as the Shell Answer Man. He groped a cigarette out of his raincoat and, cupping his nicotine-stained hands, lighted it. He exhaled a stream that

darted away in the warmish breeze and said, "Your life always this exciting? D.C. and the fibbies yesterday. Kidnap victim today. I should get into your line of work. All this fun and no reports to fill out after."

"You about through with the smart mouth now?"

He ignored me and asked quietly, "So who's the victim?"

I gave him basically the same story I gave the FBI, adding my discovery of the Soviet connection and East's confession that he was a double agent, ostensibly working for the Soviets but really working for us.

Dennehy squinted, inhaled on his cigarette, then exhaled and made a big grin, his teeth showing yellow stains. "Boyoh-boy," he said gleefully, "is the FBI going to be hacked off?"

"As for who killed him," I shivered, "your guess is as good as mine."

"Hell, probably the Russians. Maybe they tumbled to the double bit and took him out of the play."

I stared at him. "You really think they'd hit an American citizen on American soil?"

"Sure. East was dirty as can be. The Russians can be very subtle, but they're also capable of nasty public things like this. Sets a good example for their other people and sends a message to the FBI." He inhaled

smoke again and glanced around to make sure no one was listening. "Or maybe East went triple, and the fibbies tumbled to it and decided to bring the matter to a permanent conclusion."

"Now that I might buy."

"Well," Dennehy shrugged, "whichever, it's a good thing for you. At least, judging from the way East handcuffed you, and the .32 we found in his sock. And it's a good thing Deb was around, too."

"Deb?" I asked weakly, not really in the mood for more news.

A siren wailed as an ambulance backed up to East's car. Men got out and lunged at the doors. Dennehy said, "The bartender at Dunleavy's across the street. She dived in and found the driver dead and you handcuffed to an armrest and breathing water. Deb's a big strong girl, she busted the armrest right off, or we'd be getting two body bags ready instead of just one."

I coughed and reached down and held my injured wrist. The bleeding had stopped but it hurt like hell and wouldn't be doing me much good for a while. I muttered, "I'd better thank her. Where is she?"

"Gone," Dennehy shrugged. He turned and steered me by the shoulder away from the growing crowd. "You conveni-

ently left out one part of the story. Why did East abduct you?"

I said, "Give me one of those weeds." Dennehy did, and lighted it; the good coarse smoke filled me and made a glow, and I turned my light head a couple of times, my eyes looking unfocused at the black night sky. No way am I telling him, I thought. I wanted Johnston all to myself. (Of course, as it turned out, it wasn't Johnston who tipped East about me, but his assistant, who thought it would be a cute way to get back at me, and it nearly was.)

I said sharply, "I want you to make sure my name doesn't appear in any of the reports."

Dennehy said evenly, "By that I take it you don't plan to answer my question."

"You take it correctly, pal."

An edge in his voice, he said, "Why should I accommodate you, Ben? Especially after you stood me up at DuGlass?"

"DuGlass was your idea; I'm an A & W man myself. You'll do it because without me you wouldn't have known anything about this. You've got the inside story on an espionage case that the FBI clearly screwed up."

I watched his face as he thought. Then he said, "You got that right. And if your name appears in the reports, the FBI

might presume that you ignored their order to lay off. I'd hate to see what would happen to you then. For some reason I like ya, Ben. By God," he said jovially, guiding me to his car, "I'd rather let 'em stew! Come on, I'll give you a lift home."

That was when the temptation hit me the strongest, the temptation to ask Dennehy to drop me off at Karen's house. Her husband had been brutally murdered and, I tried to tell myself, wouldn't it be better for her to hear it from me, a friend, rather than an impersonal cop?

But no. For once in my life I did the unselfish thing. I stayed out of Karen's life, since that's

the way she wanted it. That's why I persuaded Dennehy to keep my name out of the reports.

Karen didn't ever need to know that East had known about our affair. Now she would never know. Bad as it was for her to lose him, and find out about his espionage activities, it would be far worse for her to discover that he'd known about her adultery all along.

Instead of the woman and the gas can packed with cash, I came out of it with a couple hundred bucks and my life. In this line of work, that's about as close to winning as you're ever likely to get.

FICTION

Don't Hang A Dead Aunt

by
Ingram
Meyer

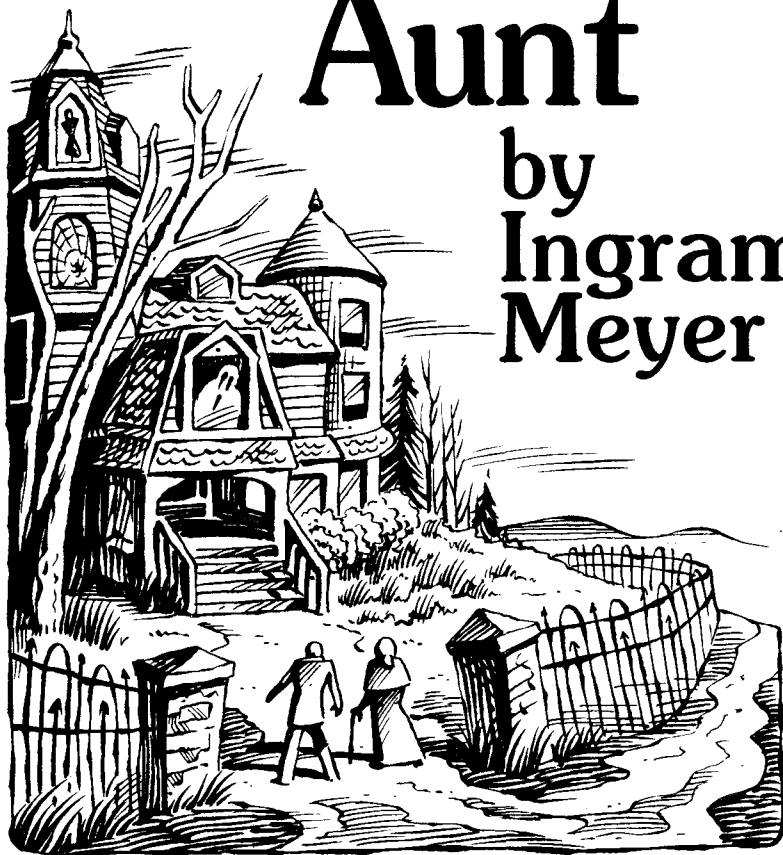


Illustration by Rex Lindsey

They had parked the car on Main Street and were walking down the long, uneven walkway towards the old mansion. Pixy's feet hurt, and he had sharp little pebbles in his shoes.

"Shouldn't wear those fancy things on a job," said Grandma.

Pixy just grunted. He looked distastefully down at her sneakers. It was embarrassing to walk in public with her. Pixy had resigned himself years ago to her little idiosyncrasies, but the footwear would always be a sore point. They had, in fact, lost business over those scruffy, smelly things, and goodness knows, there wasn't much doing in the private eye profession these days. So he tried once more.

"Nice hairdo you've got there, Gran." It really was nice. All done up and coiled around, held with a large, glittering, mother-of-pearl clip. Her silver hair glistened in the spring morning sun.

"Thanks," answered Grandma.

"Nice suit, too. Pretty blouse. Earrings are new?"

"Thanks. And—yeah." Her two-piece greenish tweed suit was huge, but it was well cut, hiding her ample rolls and bulges. The truth was, from the top of her head to the bottom of her skirt, Grandma was some smart-looking lady. From the hem of her skirt to the toes of her shoes she was a mess. Thick crinkly beige cotton stockings, shabby faded tennis shoes with knots in the laces—and holes! There was a frizzy hole on the outside of the left shoe, and one toe was almost coming out the right one. It was disgusting. Passersby would stare, fascinated.

"About the shoes, Gran—"

She sniffed, looking nastily up and down Pixy's spare, five foot two frame. Her eyes rested on his elevator shoes, and one of her eyebrows shot up. Pixy shut up.

She wasn't actually his real grandmother. Then again, wasn't she the whole town's granny? For she had been the marrying kind in her younger years—and man, had she been married! Left and right. Grandma had changed surnames like other women changed their linen. MacDonald, Kinski, Rossilini, Morgan, Zachow, and Lieberman had been names one could remember—and spell. At the end she had changed it back to her maiden name, Smith.

When Grandma became single once more, she had decided to become something other than a housewife for a change. And what she had really wanted to be was a movie star or something in that line. But she hadn't known anybody in this town who had connections or influence anywhere important. The only person who led

a fairly exciting life here was her next door neighbor Pixy. So in the end she had bought herself a partnership in his business. That had been almost ten years ago.

"Watch out for that bramble stuff," warned Pixy. But Grandma's sneakers had already ground the thorny entanglement into the earth.

They had arrived at the Giles house.

"Funny place," muttered Grandma. "Five hundred yards off Main Street, and you'd think you were at the end of the world."

"Yeah. And it's creepy. Was an unpleasant place when old Horace was still alive. But now it's dead. A dead house." Pixy shivered. He was a darn good detective and had solved over the years quite a few so-called unsolvable crimes. But they had been bright-light downtown things. You put him into an old deserted house, and Pixy became jelly. Pixy believed in ghosts, if the truth must be known. And the only person who knew this truth was Grandma.

"You are not going to do a disappearance act, are you?" She looked suspiciously at her partner. He didn't answer, for his stomach felt funny. He looked at the brown, two-story clapboard building, with its double row of rectangular windows in heavy wooden frames. Some windows had tattered curtains in them, some were cracked, and all were filthy and cobwebby. There were ghosts here—definitely!

They walked up the half dozen wooden steps to the front door, and Grandma took out the key.

"Think we'll find anything in there, Gran?"

"We had better! No results, no money."

"We *are* getting a bit short on that."

"Nobody spends money on private dicks any more. And why should they? Cops will do the jobs for free. Some cases even get solved." She sighed.

"They didn't get any results here, though. Probably got the wilies and ran off." Pixy chuckled.

"See who's talking." She opened the door and got hold of Pixy's arm. Together they walked into the old house.

The house was in surprisingly good shape on the inside. Only a thin layer of dust had accumulated on top of the heavy oak furniture and ceramic lamps. The air was stuffy, though, and the windows looked even filthier from the inside than they had from out—if that was at all possible. Pixy noticed a fat grey spider

hanging from a string of frayed curtain, and he could have sworn it looked him straight in the eyes.

"It has black eyes," he said aloud.

"Who?"

Pixy didn't bother to answer. He felt jumpy and could have kicked himself for it. Grandma walked around the living room.

"Kind of cosy in here, isn't it?" she said. "Guess old Horace wanted to discourage unwanted visitors, so he kept the outside messy and uninviting."

They went back into the hallway, and Pixy looked up the steep, unlit stairway.

"Stairs look waggly," he said. Grandma stopped beside him.

"What d'you mean—waggly? Carpet is a bit threadbare, railing needs a little paint, but that doesn't make the stairs unsafe." She started slowly up, her sneakers going flip flop. Pixy stayed behind until she turned at the landing. Then he took the steps two by two.

"Scared by yourself down there?" snarled Grandma.

"'Course not." Pixy walked bravely down the long, narrow hallway, opening doors at random. His heart beat furiously, but he wasn't going to let *her* know. Even she wouldn't understand that he knew, was absolutely sure, that they weren't alone.

"Come here and have a look. This seems to be some sort of den," Grandma called.

Pixy hurried back and, standing on his toes, looked over her shoulder. Well, well. Downstairs had been a bit sinister, with all the chunky furniture crowded everywhere, and with the ugly portraits on the walls. The stairway, the upstairs hall, and the bedrooms he'd peeked into had been decidedly odd—all plum-color, purplish and brown. But this now, this den or whatever, made Pixy's skin crawl. For here, on the walls, hung shrunken heads. That's right! He closed his eyes and shook his head. When he looked again, sure enough, they were still there. Eight heads, all kind of rust-colored and shrivelled up, with long black hair tied into pony-tails.

"Who are they?" whispered Pixy.

"How the hell should I know! Souvenirs?"

"I mean, *they* aren't why we are here, are they?"

"Not likely," answered Grandma. "You read Horace's posthumous letter to us. It stated clearly that somebody only had to find his Aunt Adabelle's remains and give them a decent burial. The house can't be sold until she's outa here."

"What he really meant, her ghost has to get out of here before—"

"Stop that nonsense, Pixy. Ghosts and spirits, my foot! You really are weird sometimes, you know."

"Well, I feel a presence in this place."

"You give me the creeps. I should have come alone." She was getting mad, so Pixy kept quiet.

"Horace and his aunt were anthropologists. Were said to have been shipwrecked for a couple of years somewhere in New Guinea around the time the Second World War broke out," said Grandma. She felt a little sorry for snapping at her younger partner. But he could drive her absolutely crazy. Why she had ever gone into business with this little chicken was a mystery in itself to her. She must have been daft. Or maybe he had brought out some deeply buried, motherly feelings in her. Grandma had no children of her own.

The two detectives walked all around the large room, opening desk drawers, lifting sofa cushions. Grandma even took out a long bunch of dried pampas grass and looked inside a tall, skinny, golden and black jug.

"Any bones in there?" mocked Pixy. Grandma didn't bother to answer.

"Are we looking for bones?" asked Pixy. He had paused by the window. "Because if we are, how do we know they aren't out in the garden? It looks awfully untidy out there. Weeds and junk all over the place."

"Not according to the letter. Says only to remove Aunt Adabelle's remains from the house before selling it and dividing the money among those funny relatives." Grandma looked suspiciously at the jug again, but there was nothing in it except the pampas grass. She gave it a slight kick with a tennis shoe.

Grandma and Pixy took off their jackets and rolled up their sleeves. Then they went seriously to work. They looked into cupboards, emptied storage boxes, looked into the freezer and the oven, took out air vents and furnace filters—in short, they turned the house upside down. But they found neither bones nor ashes nor anything that could remotely be Aunt Adabelle.

Exhausted, they went back to the kitchen where Grandma perked a pot of coffee.

"I wish we'd never heard of old Horace," grumbled Pixy.

"Well, we need the money, don't we?" Grandma sighed.

They sat for a while in silence and drank their coffee. Pixy's stomach growled, but he wasn't going to eat anything in this house. He hoped he would be home early enough. He had asked What's-Her-Name from down at the end of his street out for dinner.

They went next up to the attic. There wasn't much there, though, just a few boxes with books and old clothes. There were empty suitcases and a couple of broken chairs. In the corner stood a headless dress dummy with a faded velvet ballgown on it. Grandma lifted the skirt, but there was only wire and cheesecloth underneath.

"Too bad this thing hasn't got a head," joked Pixy. "We could have put it into a coffin and—"

"You want to be a stand-up comedian, Pixy, you go to Las Vegas." Grandma was on her way downstairs again.

They took another look at the living room, but to no avail. Very tired, both dropped into overstuffed, plum-colored armchairs. Pixy wished he could turn on the television, but he didn't quite dare with Grandma around.

They both heard it. First there came a faint clunk from above, then a sound like something sliding across the floor. Pixy's heart missed a beat, and Grandma jumped up.

"There's someone up there," she whispered.

"I told you so! Ever since we came here, I tried to tell you, there's someone else in the house. I felt eyes."

"Pixy, one more word of ghosts out of you, and I'll murder you with my bare hands!"

They both walked quietly out into the hallway.

"Should have brought a gun. Why didn't we bring guns?" hissed Pixy. Fear made him mean. Could one shoot a ghost?

"Because we never carry guns," whispered Grandma. "We aren't fiction toughies! And stop clicking your teeth! Damn it, Pixy, you make me nervous."

"I make you nervous? What about that upstairs? *Do* we go up?" Oh man, he hoped not. "Or do we go somewhere and call the cops?"

Grandma just looked pityingly at her partner, then started to tiptoe up the stairs. Pixy was right behind her.

"Sounded like the noise came from the den, what?" he whispered.

They paused outside the door and put their ears against it. No sound came from within.

"Maybe something just toppled over from a draft or something," said Grandma. "Let's go inside."

Pixy grabbed the door handle, and both detectives burst into the room. There was no one there. Pixy walked slowly towards the desk, and Grandma went to look behind the sofa. Her sneaker hit something hidden under the ruffles. She yelled. Pixy spun around and watched with fascinated horror as one of the shrunken heads came rolling towards him, like a billiard ball. The hair was wrapped all around it, with the eye sockets peeking through. It crashed against the desk leg and came to a halt.

Grandma recovered from the shock and walked slowly over.

"Heck, I kicked it with my practically bare toe." She looked shaken. "I mean, it is pretty horrible to kick a poor shrunken head with one's toe." She stooped and picked up the head, turning it this way and that.

"How can you touch that thing?" Pixy was disgusted.

But Grandma took it over to the window where the light was better.

"Come here a minute, Pixy. Have a good look at this thing. Does anything strike you as odd?"

"Does anything strike me as odd!" cried Pixy. "How odd can something get? Here I'm in the same room with a nice old lady—a lady who's mucking about with a human head. And I'm being asked if anything is—"

"Calm down. That's not what I meant. Have a look at this hair, and then compare it with those ponytails over on the wall. See any difference?"

They both turned to the display wall, and Grandma held the head against the other ones.

"See," she said. "These all have coarse, straight, blue-black hair. And now feel this here. It's soft and dull. I shouldn't wonder if this has been dyed."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Pixy. "You're right, it is different. You think we found Aunt Adabelle? That's great! Now we can collect our money."

"Not so quick! Slow down, Pixy. We've only got the head."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Gran! Do we now look for a shrunken body? Listen, I can't stand this house another moment. Let's get out of here!"

"Hmm." Grandma sat down on the sofa, putting the head in her lap. "You know, Pixy, what I don't understand is, why did this

particular head fall off the wall?"

"She wants a decent burial, that's why. If they don't get put in the earth by a clergyman, some of them walk, you know."

"Walk?"

"Sure. At nights."

"Pixy! I warn you, don't give me that ghost garbage."

"But it's true."

"Then why don't the other seven on the wall . . . walk? Tell me that, Pixy."

"Because they are probably New Guinea natives. They are used to having their heads shrunk and hung up for decoration. Anyhow, seems old Horace learned a few tricks from the natives about—er—ornaments while being shipwrecked, huh?"

Grandma just shook her head. "Yeah, I guess he must have." She turned the shrunk head so it looked straight at her.

"She doesn't look too unhappy, really, do you think, Pixy?"

Pixy felt his spine tingle. "Doesn't look especially happy, neither," he grumbled. All he wanted was to get out of this creepy house. If only they hadn't been so desperate for money, he'd never have agreed to take on this silly job.

"You think we'll get paid for only—that?" he asked. "Maybe that's all there is here."

"It probably is. I'm not so morbid as to think for one moment that old Horace did her in right here. No, Pixy, what I think is that this poor thing died in New Guinea—maybe of some tropical disease—and this was the only way her poor, grief-befallen nephew could manage to take her home with him. Remember, those were bad times, with a worldwide war on, when Horace and Adabelle were shipwrecked. You couldn't just throw a body onto some fast jet and fly home within a couple of hours."

"No, I suppose not, Gran."

Grandma got up from the sofa, putting the shrunk head into her pocket. Then she said, "Listen, Pixy. Remember what you joked about up in the attic? About the dress dummy?"

"About using it for a body?"

"That's right." Grandma looked slyly at her partner. "We do need some cash—and soon. Would take a long time, maybe months, or even years, to convince certain people about the missing body."

Pixy looked at Grandma and grinned.

"Want me to order the coffin right away?"

FICTION

A Web Of Books

by Loren D.
Estleman

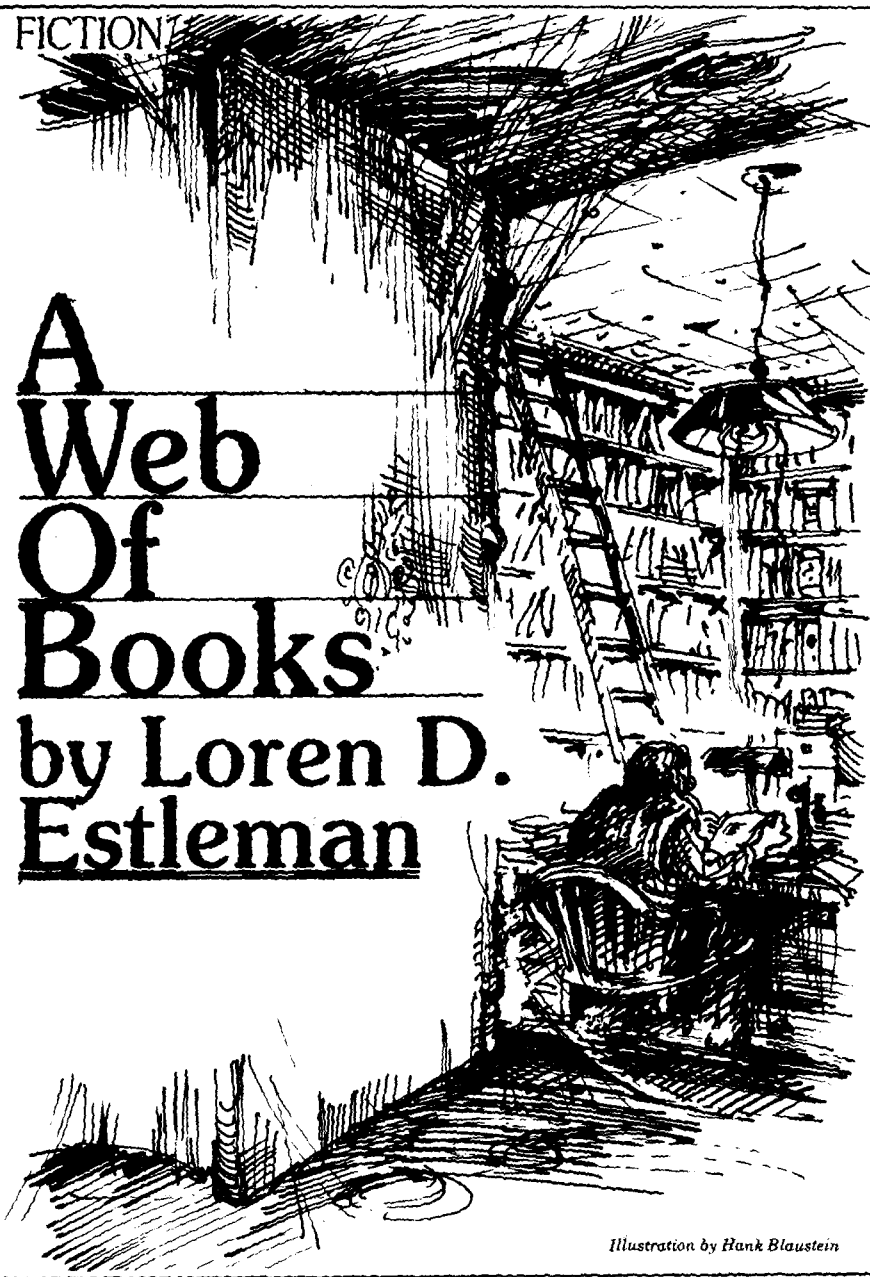


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

The visitor stepped inside the bookshop and blinked. The muted light and cool, dank air seemed otherworldly after the bright heat of the New Mexico street. As he closed the door, feathers of dust clinging to the spines of the decaying volumes on the shelves crawled and twitched in the current of air. The place smelled of must.

"Can I help you?" bleated the old man seated behind the dented desk. He was thin and angular, his shoulders falling away under a fraying sweater. Dull black hair spilled untidily over his collar. His face was narrow and puckered and dominated by spectacles so thick he seemed to be peering from the other side of a fish tank.

"Are you the owner?"

The old man nodded. "My name is Sharecross."

"Jed Kirby. I'm an investigator with Southwestern Life and Property." He didn't offer to shake hands. The missing finger on his right hand, a souvenir of Korea, provoked questions he was tired of answering. "I tried to call you yesterday."

"The lines are down east of town. A Santa Ana blew through over the weekend."

Kirby dismissed it with a wave of his good hand. "I'm looking for a man named Murchison, Alan Murchison. We think he has information about

an item of missing property insured by us."

"I don't know the name. Is it a book that's missing?"

"A very rare volume entitled *The Midnight Sky*, by James Edward Long, published in Edinburgh in 1758. About ten inches by seven, four hundred and fifty pages, bound in brown morocco with gold leaf on the page ends. It was stolen from a private library in Albuquerque last month. We think Murchison is the thief."

"Ah, that one," Sharecross said. "Only two copies are known to exist. Each is worth as much as some whole collections. What makes you think he'd come here?"

"He's on the run. He was nearly apprehended in Silver City, but he managed to elude the police. He'll probably try to unload the book for whatever he can get and use the money to skip to South America. Our information has him heading this way."

"Dear me, that seems like a lot of trouble over one book, even *The Midnight Sky*."

"The book's just part of it, although it's the part that most directly concerns us. The law would dearly love to have him. He murdered the owner in order to gain possession."

"Dear me," repeated the bookseller.

"It pieces together like this." Kirby caught himself gesturing with the incomplete hand and switched. "Murchison, a dealer who supplies rare curiosities to collectors who don't ask questions, went to this man Scullock with an offer to buy the book. When Scullock refused to sell, Murchison lost control and split the fellow's cranium with a bronze bust of Homer the police found near the body. Then he grabbed the book and left. When his customer got suspicious and backed out of the deal, he took off."

Sharecross looked thoughtful. "Your company must be particularly anxious to recover the item, since you beat the police here."

"It's insured for two hundred thousand dollars, payable to Scullock's heirs if we fail to get it back. My employers aren't in business for their health."

"Who is?" The old man stretched a scrawny arm and lifted a book the size and thickness of a bathroom tile from a stack at his feet. "Two hundred thousand is far outside my budget, Mr. Kirby. This is more my speed." He handed it to the visitor.

It was bound in burgundy leather, heavier than it looked. Kirby ran fingers over the hand-tooling, opened it carefully, and glanced at the publisher's ads

bound into the back of the book. "First edition?"

"Third. Browning's *Ring and the Book*, the one with the erratum on page sixty-seven. I paid seven hundred and fifty dollars for it in Las Cruces two years ago. That's more than I can afford to pay for any book, but I couldn't resist it. The pension I get from the Santa Fe police department won't stand that kind of strain often."

Kirby looked up, startled. "You were a policeman?"

"Detective. Many years ago, I'm afraid."

Too many, thought the other. He returned the book. "Old books don't really interest me. You'd know Murchison if you saw him. He's small, kind of fragile-looking, with prematurely white hair. Wears tweed jackets and smokes a pipe."

A fresh furrow appeared in Sharecross's forehead.

"He's been in, hasn't he?"

"Just once." The old man fondled the Browning. "To buy a book, not sell one. A badly dilapidated copy of Shakespeare's tragedies for ten dollars. That was yesterday. He said his name was Thacker. I think he's staying at the hotel."

"Where's that?"

"Across the street, next to the old town well."

Kirby hurried out. As the door closed behind him he

glimpsed Sharecross easing a thick volume down from a high shelf.

Twenty minutes later the visitor was back. Behind the desk Sharecross lifted his eyebrows inquisitively over the big book. It was a current edition of *Who's Who in Book Collecting*.

"What kind of law you got around here?" Kirby demanded.

"Sheriff McCreedy," came the reply, after a moment. "But he's at the county seat. There's no way to reach him with the telephone lines down, short of going there. What's wrong?"

"Murchison's dead. Someone shot him."

"Shot him! Are you sure?"

"Bullets make holes. The blood's still fresh." Kirby paused. "The book isn't in his room. I searched."

Sharecross dragged over the old-fashioned upright telephone on his desk.

"You said the lines were down," Kirby reminded him.

"Not in town. Hello, Birdie?" He spoke into the mouthpiece. "Birdie, get hold of Uncle Ned and ask him to fetch the sheriff. It's urgent." He rang off. To Kirby:

"Ned Scofield's ninety-seven, but he can make that old Indian motorcycle of his sing.

He'll have the law here by sundown."

"Whoever killed Murchison was after the book. Now that he has it, there's no way he'll be within fifty miles of here by sundown."

"Maybe he doesn't have it. Did you search Murchison's car?"

"Car!" Kirby cuffed his forehead. "Stupid! He didn't walk here. Where would I find it?"

"Behind the hotel would be my guess. That's where all the guests park. Maybe you should wait for the sheriff." But the old man was talking to the visitor's back. He was already out the door.

Kirby got the dead man's license number from an upset clerk at the front desk. The plate belonged to a late-model sedan under a skin of desert dust. The inside was an oven. He stripped off his jacket and got to work. After half an hour he climbed out, empty-handed and gasping, and leaned back against a fender to mop his face with a soaked handkerchief. Sharecross approached through shimmering waves of heat, *Who's Who* under one arm.

"Nothing?"

Kirby, too overheated to talk, shook his head.

"I see you checked out the

trunk and engine compartment," observed the bookseller, nodding at the open lid and dislodged hood. "I just came from Murchison's room. He was shot twice at close range. Whoever did it must have used a silencer or he'd have alerted everyone in the hotel."

"What were you doing there?" Kirby was cooling off slowly. Dusk was gathering.

"I conducted a search of my own. Once a cop, always a cop. There's something missing besides *The Midnight Sky*."

"A towel?"

"The Shakespeare I sold him. You didn't happen to find it?"

"No, but why should you care? You got your ten bucks."

"It seems to me a thief who'd kill for Long's *magnum opus* couldn't be bothered with such a common item. Also, I asked some of the other merchants what they could tell me about Thacker, or Murchison, or whatever he was calling himself. Carl Lathrop at the dry goods said he sold Thacker a thirty foot extension cord last night just before closing."

The other contemplated his handkerchief. "What could he have wanted with that?"

"That's one mystery. Another is why was he wasting time here when he knew the law and your company were on his heels? Why stop here at all, for that

matter? Why not head straight for Mexico and peddle the book in one of the major tourist centers? He seems to have made a lot of mistakes for an experienced criminal."

"He'd never been chased before. Maybe he panicked."

"Maybe," agreed Sharecross. "Or maybe he came here to meet a partner. Maybe it was his partner who killed him. Well, we can stand here spinning theories all night and freeze to death. The desert cools off fast when the sun goes down. Why don't we go back to the shop and wait for the sheriff?"

On the way they passed the town well. It was partially boarded over and the ancient peaked roof leaned ten degrees off plumb.

"If it's dry it should be torn down and the hole filled in," Kirby observed. "It's a safety hazard. Someone could fall in."

"You're probably right, but I'll be sorry to see it go. When it does I'll be the second oldest thing in town after Uncle Ned Scoffield."

The bookshop seemed even gloomier by electric light. Pacing up and down, glancing at the titles on the shelves, Kirby asked his host why he had quit the police. "Job get too tough?"

"It got too easy. The pattern never varies. Someone commits a crime and attempts to confuse

the issue, but the more he tries the simpler it grows. He spins a web and ends up catching himself." He wiped his glasses. His eyes were sardine-colored. "I find tracing a book's provenance far more challenging."

Sirens shattered the desert peace. Two blue and white prowl cars ground to a halt in front of the shop, their lights throbbing and splashing red and blue all over the street. A middle-aged man whose tanned face matched the color of his uniform shirt strode in, towing three deputies in similar attire. They all wore Stetsons and high boots.

"What's going on, Avery?" demanded the man in front.

"Murder, sheriff." Sharecross put on his spectacles. "The victim is registered at the hotel under the name Thacker, though he's known elsewhere as Alan Murchison. You'll find him in Room 14 with two bullets in his chest." He indicated Kirby. "I think a paraffin test on this gentleman's hands will show within a reasonable margin of certainty that he fired the gun that put them there."

Before Kirby could react, one of the deputies seized him and hurled him up against a wall full of books. He was commanded to brace himself on his arms and spread his feet. "The old man's crazy!" he protested. "What motive would I have

to—" Rough hands frisked him.

Sharecross said, "You won't find the gun on him. My guess is he chucked it into the well. As things stood he barely had time to kill Murchison, search his room for the book, ditch the murder weapon, and come back here to report the crime."

Sheriff McCreedy directed his deputies to watch the prisoner and accompanied Sharecross outside. The sun was almost gone.

"I've something else to show you before we look at the body." The old man filled him in on the way to the abandoned well.

"Kirby was the dead man's partner," he explained, when the sheriff had been brought up to date. "Or perhaps I should refer to him as Jed Carlisle instead of Kirby. That's the name he's listed under in *Who's Who in Book Collecting*. Carlisle was the customer who commissioned Murchison to find *The Midnight Sky*. The way I read things, Murchison tried to shake him down for more money by threatening to pin the owner's murder on his customer. Carlisle agreed to his terms, said he'd meet him here. It's an out-of-the-way place, perfect for what he had in mind. Then he came here, posing as an insurance investigator to throw off the authorities, and shot Murchison to death. He made two

mistakes. The first was failing to find out where the book was hidden before he silenced his victim.

"I don't think Kirby, or Carlisle, has much respect for rural law officers, sheriff. When a search of Murchison's hotel room and car didn't yield his prize he was content to sit back and let you comb the town for it, confident that when it was found he could step forward and claim it for his 'company.' But then he was more bold than smart or he wouldn't have planned this whole thing the way he did."

The sheriff pulled at his lower lip. "What made you suspect him in the first place?"

"He seemed to have more than an employee's knowledge of that book. I tested him by handing him a rare Browning. He claimed that kind of thing didn't interest him; if that were so he would simply have glanced at it to be polite and handed it back. Instead he stroked the binding, lifted open the cover as if it were made of glass, looked closely at the advertisements bound in at the back. After that I consulted *Who's Who*, going through it entry by entry until I found one that fit the man I knew as Jed Kirby. There aren't very many wealthy bibliophiles who are missing the third finger from their right hand. It's a Carlisle trademark, like J.

Pierpont Morgan's swollen nose."

"You said he made two mistakes. What was the second?"

"Look in the well."

Shadows filled the ancient excavation. McCreedy produced his flashlight and switched it on. Sharecross directed him to train the beam up under the dilapidated roof. Near the apex, secured by a black cord to the rod that had once supported the bucket, dangled a thick volume with a worn cover beginning to split along the hinge.

"Is that *The Midnight Sky*?" asked the sheriff.

"Hardly." The bookseller untied the second knot that held the book in place. It dropped into the well, pulling its cord. As it descended, a paper-wrapped parcel roughly the same size rose from the depths. Sharecross freed it from the cord and unwrapped it. The sheriff's flashlight gleamed off handsome leather and gold leaf. "Carlisle's second mistake was being in too much of a hurry when he disposed of the gun. He should have looked at the well more closely. The Shakespeare made the perfect counterweight. Note what Murchison tied them with."

McCreedy examined it. "Looks like an extension cord."

"Thirty feet long, I should

judge. It was Murchison's last trick. If he'd purchased that much rope and Carlisle found out, the well would have seemed the logical next step. Extension cord was just offbeat enough to keep everyone guessing."

"Except you."

The old man ignored the reluctant compliment. "I told Carlisle earlier that the criminal often catches himself in his own web. This one was spun out of leather and buckram and gold and paper. A web of books. Murchison used a book to help conceal the book he had com-

mitted murder to obtain. That book, and Carlisle's obsession to have it, drove him to murder the murderer. A book made me suspect him, and another book led to his identification and apprehension. And now, sheriff—" he paused uncomfortably and adjusted his spectacles on his thin nose—"I imagine it's your intention to, er, throw the book at him."

Sheriff McCreedy stared at him in mute accusation.

"Yes. Well," said Sharecross, and turned back in the direction of his shop.

CASES ON FILE

The Printer's Murder

by Vincent James



Sam Adams, a robust man in his mid-thirties who was rated one of the finest printers in New York City, left his shop at 59 Gold Street on the afternoon of a raw, damp September day in 1841. His intention was to collect overdue debts in the neighborhood, and he made his way along Theatre Alley to Park Row, stopping at the business places of reluctant bill-settlers. Then Adams walked alongside Hall Park to Chambers Street. No one saw him enter the Granite Building, on the corner of Broadway

and Chambers Street, in the course of his rounds, but it is certain that he did, and it is also certain that he was never seen alive again.

At about six o'clock on that same September day, John Caldwell Colt sat at the window of his small office on the second floor of the Granite Building, staring at the evening darkness engulfing the misty trees in City Hall Park across the way. His hands were still trembling, and his heart beat against his ribs like a small bird trapped in his chest.

Above, John C. Colt, a drawing from the New York Sun-Extra.

The room behind him was sparsely furnished. Beside the chair he was sitting on was a deal table cluttered with books, writing materials, papers, and two unlit candle stubs. In a corner stood a half-filled wooden bucket and an empty packing case. Wrapped in an old awning, the body of Sam Adams lay on the floor.

The office next to Colt's was occupied by Asa H. Wheeler, a teacher of bookkeeping and penmanship, from whom Colt rented his small space. He knew Wheeler had been coaching a student late that afternoon, and as he brooded in the spreading darkness, he wondered how much Wheeler had heard.

John Colt, slim and bearded, possibly in his late twenties, was the younger son of a wealthy and socially prominent family that called a large fashionable house on upper Broadway home. At the time, his brother Samuel was promoting his soon-to-be-famous Colt revolver. Another brother was a judge in the city of St. Louis. The family was conventional, successful, settled. John was the maverick. Instead of choosing a career in law, medicine, or finance, and, in the normal course of events, marrying a socially and financially compatible equal, he had left his home and rented a room in Greenwich Street. Later he

compounded the rift by moving in with a seamstress, Caroline Henshaw, a liaison of which the family strongly disapproved. Caroline was described as a very beautiful girl completely dependent on the money she earned from her work.

Colt had literary ambitions and possessed rejection slips from such influential publications of the day as the *Mirror*, the *Knickerbocker*, and *Graham's* of Philadelphia. No one was interested in a novel he had completed. Finally, as he had always been clever with figures and accounting, he set himself to writing, with the tenuous sponsorship of Putnam's publishing house, what he intended to be a textbook on bookkeeping. It was in pursuance of this work that he had rented the office from Wheeler. Galleys for correction were supplied by printer Sam Adams as the book progressed.

Colt glanced back over his shoulder at the bloodstained hammer still lying near the shrouded body. He had become a murderer; the mark of Cain was on him. But there was no remorse in his heart, only fear and frustration. He felt trapped, hemmed in by the enormity of his deed, and he ground his teeth in rage. Why had this happened to him!

Suddenly he needed air, to

get outdoors and think things through. He shrugged into his jacket, put on his hat, opened the door a crack, surveyed the empty hall, and went out. He turned into the almost deserted park, wild thoughts running through his head. He could set fire to the building—hide everything in the consuming ashes. But he could not bring himself to the point of murdering the innocent people who sometimes slept in those small offices, and he discarded the idea.

The haze lifted and the sky became black velvet sprinkled with diamond dust. City Hall's cupola rose above the trees, a pale silhouette, and a lamp-lighter plodded slowly down the darkened thoroughfare, touching a light to the new gas lamps as he made his way. Colt idly watched him for a few moments, then recalled that his brother was meeting some possible backers for his invention at the City Hotel on Cedar Street. Samuel might be able to help—give him some advice. He would tell him how it happened, the argument, the sudden feel of the hammer in his hand.

Colt walked down Broadway and entered the spacious candlelit lobby. He glanced hopefully about him. In a small alcove far in the rear of the lobby, his brother was deep in

conversation with two businessmen. There were sketches and papers scattered on the table before them. His brother held up a diagram for their inspection. John Colt left silently.

Back in his tiny office, he lit the candle stubs. He had listened for a few moments outside Asa Wheeler's door, but all was silent. He had made up his mind about what he was going to do, and there was grim work ahead. He dragged the packing case out into the middle of the room.

It was well after ten when Colt left the Granite Building. He stopped at the Washington bathhouse on Pearl Street to cleanse his shirt, handkerchief, and himself before going home.

Caroline was asleep when Colt finally arrived at their flat, and he crept quietly into bed. She awoke and asked him why he was so late, and he made the excuse that he had met a friend from Philadelphia and would have to be up and out early in the morning to see him off.

On Saturday morning, the 18th of September, Colt stopped at Wood's hardware store and bought some nails. Then he entered the Granite Building. When the packing case was secured to his satisfaction, he dragged it into the hall. He was afraid to take it down the flight of stairs by himself, and he

went into the street to find a cartman. Luckily, at that moment, a cart was bumping over the cobblestones of Chambers Street. Between himself and the cartman, the packing case was brought down to the first floor. He tipped the cartman twelve cents and dismissed him. Earlier that morning he had ascertained that a packet ship, the *Kalamazoo*, was riding at anchor at the foot of Maiden Lane. It was scheduled to set sail shortly for New Orleans. Colt meant the case to be stowed in the *Kalamazoo's* hold when it left. The box was addressed to St. Louis by way of New Orleans.

After waiting a few minutes, he again went outside and hailed another cartman. With him, Colt arranged to have the box hauled down to the East River. Colt accompanied it. While the box was being swung aboard the *Kalamazoo*, he went into the shipping office and boldly requested a receipt.

Except that it was beginning to rain, everything thus far had gone splendidly. He paid off the cartman and tore the receipt to bits less than two squares away from the dock; then he stopped at the eating room of Lovejoy's Hotel opposite City Hall and ordered a hot roll and a cup of coffee.

In the meantime the printing shop foreman had thought it

strange that Sam Adams did not return before closing time Friday night, but Adams's wife, Emmaline, had thought it stranger still that he never came home at all. When there was no appearance of the missing man on Saturday, the police were notified. They went about investigating the disappearance of Sam Adams efficiently and, for the times, in a professional manner.

Newspapers were requested to feature the disappearance of Adams and to ask that anyone with possible information come forward. It was established that Adams's business was good and that there were no crippling debts to make him run from his creditors. Happily married for a number of years, he was not known as a philanderer.

A list of clients Adams intended to see that Friday afternoon was drawn up and officers dispatched to check them. Known criminals were brought in for questioning, saloons and "low places" looked into, but the big break came when Asa Wheeler entered the picture. Upset and uneasy about the newspaper accounts of the printer's disappearance, he resolved to report his suspicions. He told the police that in the late afternoon of the day in question he had been coaching a pupil in the mysteries of book-keeping when they suddenly

heard strange noises, followed by a muffled crash, coming from the next room, one he had sublet to a man named John Colt. Becoming curious, as well as being vaguely disturbed, he had gone into the hall and, stooping, had, with the tip of the pen he carried, slid the keyhole guard aside and peered into the room. He saw the back of a man in shirtsleeves bending over something on the floor. The man straightened and then went back to whatever had occupied his attention. He appeared to be dragging something. Two men's hats lay on the table opposite. Wheeler returned to his own office, dismissed his pupil, and stayed on for a while listening. There were no other sounds, and he left shortly before seven o'clock.

Colt's name was on the list of those Adams expected to canvass. The police were well aware of the power and influence of the Colt family in New York City, and they decided to proceed with the utmost caution. Fairly certain of their prey, they placed Colt under surveillance.

The janitor of the Granite Building, Law Orton, was quietly interviewed. He told of seeing a packing case standing outside Colt's room. Orton had left the building on an errand, and when he returned on Saturday morning, Colt and the

case were inside the doorway on the ground floor. "New Orleans" was printed on the case.

The police next contacted Mr. Godfrey, the City Superintendent of Carts, asking him if he could possibly locate the cartman who had taken a packing case from the Granite Building on Saturday morning, September 18th, and find out where he had taken it. Superintendent Godfrey came up with one Richard Barstow, who told the police he had been hired by a man at the Granite Building to cart a packing case down to the foot of Maiden Lane. It was to be stowed in the packet ship *Kalamazoo*, bound for New Orleans.

The investigation had taken time. It was by then the 25th of September, and the newspapers and the town were full of the mystery. Colt, however, was unaware of the net closing around him. As far as he knew, the *Kalamazoo* was riding high seas.

But he was wrong. Once again fate stepped in, and this time it dealt him a mortal blow. The *Kalamazoo* was still anchored at the foot of Maiden Lane. The wife of the owner had suffered a minor respiratory condition, one she thought, at the instigation of her doctor, might be helped by the salubrious climate of New Orleans. Naturally, however, she couldn't be

expected to pack overnight, so until she was ready to go the ship lingered, to the disgust and chagrin of Captain Hawke and his crew.

On the 26th of September, the police, armed with their carefully gathered information and accompanied by the mayor of New York, the Honorable Robert Morris, descended on the *Kalamazoo* to demand that a certain packing case be taken off the ship at once. When it was lifted onto the dock, it was seen that the box was directed to R. P. Gross, St. Louis, c/o Mr. Gray, New Orleans. With the mayor, the police, the captain, and the crew standing by, the packing case was broken open. Stuffed into the box was Sam Adams. John Colt was immediately arrested.

Lodged in the Tombs, the recently completed prison on Centre Street, Colt cannot be said to have languished. At least not according to Charles Dana, a fourteen-dollar-a-week reporter with Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. "His food was brought from a hotel. He enjoyed the finest of wines and segars and his 'cell' was more like a finely appointed apartment. Pictures were on the walls and a rare Kidderminster rug covered the cold stone of the floor. The latest magazines and novels were there for him to peruse." A never ending parade of visitors,

led by faithful Miss Henshaw, included many socially and politically prominent figures to help him while away the time.

The family could not bear the thought of Colt's being hanged as a common criminal, and their coffers were opened to provide the finest legal talent for his defense. And the city's betting fraternity agreed. The odds were that Colt would never be convicted and, even if he were, he would never be executed. His family and friends were too rich and too highly connected, they said.

On the 31st of January, 1842, John Caldwell Colt underwent his trial, held in City Hall. Judge Kent presided, assisted by Aldermen Purdy and Lee. District Attorney James R. Whiting conducted the prosecution. Colt was defended by the best lawyers money could buy. The line they took was manslaughter in self defense with mediating circumstances. Adams had attacked and was choking Colt as the result of a violent argument. Colt was forced backward; his groping hand had encountered the hammer. He had used it strictly in self defense. So their story ran.

The trial lasted ten days, and more than fifty witnesses were called. It created the greatest excitement in the city. Crowds who couldn't jam into the courtroom stood outside, waiting pa-

tiently for tidbits of information.

Incredibly, Colt (who did not appear on the witness stand) insisted on a lengthy and bone-chilling statement, really a "confession," which was read in court by Robert Emmett, one of his counsel. That statement probably did as much to convict him as anything else, for convicted he was. Subsequently, all legal loopholes were explored by his counsel without success. He was sentenced to die on November 18th, 1842, more than a year after the murder of Adams.

Nonetheless, Colt's friends as well as Miss Henshaw continued to visit, and the Reverend Dr. Anthon, rector of St. Mark's in the Bouwerie and a close friend of the Colt family, acted as his spiritual adviser.

When the day of reckoning arrived, it brought with it a number of bizarre events. First, it was announced that Miss Henshaw and John Colt would be married in prison that day, with the Reverend Dr. Anthon conducting the ceremony. It was to be attended by a small group of friends and brother Samuel. For the ladies, it was noted the bride wore "a straw bonnet, green shawl, a claret colored cloak trimmed with red cord, and a muff for the occasion."

Second, some time after the guests and Colt's new bride had departed and shortly before the

execution was to take place, it was discovered that the cupola of the Tombs was on fire.

These two events culminated in pandemonium in the jail and in the surrounding streets. Firemen rushed about with hoses and apparatus. Crowds milled about, getting in everyone's way. The officials and guards of the Tombs tried to be of assistance but of course were not. After a hectic interval, a sort of calm returned, broken almost immediately by the Reverend Dr. Anthon's rushing out of Colt's "apartment" shouting that Colt was dead. It seemed he had stabbed himself in the heart and then piously folded his hands across his chest.

A coroner's jury was speedily assembled, none of whom had ever seen Colt in their lives. They rendered a verdict of "death by suicide" after which the body was hastily interred in St. Mark's. The Reverend Dr. Anthon officiated and some of the family were in attendance.

After this macabre comedy of errors, there was a tremendous outpouring of indignation in the city. The newspapers demanded to know who had furnished the knife. There were threats of an investigation, to be conducted by Governor Seward himself. The tumult raged for a few days; then, almost magically, it faded away. The heat was off.

The gamblers who frequented the oyster parlors, coffee houses, saloons, and "low places" looked at each other and smiled tight little smiles. A large portion of the public believed that the body was a substitute and that Colt, under the excitement of the fire and the accompanying circumstances, and aided by friends, had escaped the vengeance of the law.

Some years later, a story made the rounds that while traveling in the West, a certain Mr. Everett, an acquaintance of Colt's, had run into him in California's Santa Clara Valley, where he was playing the role of a Spanish *ranchero*. Could this possibly be? It was also said that Mrs. Colt, the former Caroline Henshaw, had disappeared completely. She had never returned to their lodgings.

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LEONARD HABAS
VICE PRESIDENT OF CIRCULATION

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



MAJ SJÖWALL & PER WAHLÖÖ

It could be argued that little imagination is required of the crime fiction writer who depicts the seamy side of contemporary life. Scenes of teenage drug-induced crime, rat-infested tenements, subway muggings, child molesting, terrorism, and the many lesser cruelties inflicted on human beings by an indifferent society can all be had for the price of a daily newspaper. It requires more art, however, to use this grim background only as a painted drop, against which individuals are shown fighting their own private battles, struggling with swamping malaise, and overcoming bureaucratic blockades. That is what Swedish writers Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö accomplished

in their police procedurals featuring Inspector Martin Beck.

Sjöwall and Wahlöö were working on different magazines when they met. We're told that over lunch one day they discovered common interests, interests that led to marriage and a literary collaboration spanning ten years and as many books. They chose in their novels to write a series that would "trace a man's personality changing over the years, as the milieu and the atmosphere, the political climate, the economic climate, and the crime rate change." Beginning with *Roseanna* in 1965 and ending with *The Terrorists*, and the death of Per Wahlöö, in 1975, they achieved their goals admirably. Martin Beck mystery fans are

by no means a rarity, and probably the Walter Matthau movie of *The Laughing Policeman* increased their audience, though it bore only a superficial resemblance to the book. But in a column devoted to applauding the very best of mystery series, these books must be included, even at the risk of stating the obvious.

The ten novels in the Martin Beck series are police procedurals in the finest sense of the term. The principal setting is Stockholm, although some cases call Beck and his colleagues on the national police force to outer districts and occasionally to other countries. The crimes are as brutal and violent as the times we live in, and Sweden's social problems seem indistinguishable from America's. Several cases expanding that novel's theme are always woven into each book; there are plot twists and nearly perfect crimes, some lost—but most won—by the police. And there's no shortage of action: Beck and his men are working even when the investigation seems stalemated.

But the strength of these books is in their characters, and because they all mature over time, I urge you to read the books in order. The newly-jacketed Vintage Books paperbacks make it an easy task, for the books are numbered in order of

their original appearance. This isn't a requirement; each novel stands alone. But it's fascinating to watch the policemen change, and their relationships alter, in the course of ten years.

One gets so attached to the characters, too. Inspector Martin Beck is the most fully developed, of course, so richly drawn, in fact, that he defies a capsule description. When first introduced, Beck is middle-aged, tall and trim, and trapped in a miserable marriage. He has chronic stomach trouble (psychosomatic), rarely resorts to violence, clams up at the first mention of politics, and is something of a loner. He dutifully visits his senile mother, likes his teenage daughter, and, though he rarely admits it, thinks his younger son a brat. He is tenacious, given to introspection, and patiently tolerant of situations over which he has no control. At one point in the series he is critically wounded. His recuperation gives him the opportunity to leave his wife, and in a later novel he finds his match in the independent Rhea. (His stomach trouble clears up, too.) The politicization of the Swedish police force is a running theme, and the insanity of the bureaucrats above Beck is often visible. Yet he finally becomes chief of the National Homicide Squad, a

promotion long postponed by his superiors. He is regarded as one of the best policemen in Sweden.

Lennart Kollberg is Martin's best friend on the force until the former decides to resign (in the ninth novel). Len is overweight, sensible, and a sensualist, happily married late in life and devoted to his home comforts. He's bright and bitter about the changes in the force, and he's a vocal opponent of the policy that policemen should be heavily armed. Len is sorely missed by Beck in the last novel. I missed him, too.

A large supporting cast make appearances throughout the series, playing varied roles in Beck's life from book to book. Frederick Melander is "a long dismal figure" known for his imperturbable logic and his phenomenal memory. He tries to get ten hours' sleep nightly; he's parsimonious and dull, has no sense of humor, and lacks inspiration. "Briefly, he was a first-class policeman." Einar Ronn is a taciturn northerner with "a perpetually running nose which dominated his face." He's half of an odd couple, the only friend Gunvald Larsson has on the force. Larsson himself is a wonderfully oversized character, the black sheep of a wealthy family, a big, beefy man prone to violent outbursts.

He's fearless, outstandingly rude, and constantly disgusted when his carefully chosen, custom tailored clothes are ruined on the job. *The Locked Room* has an hysterically funny account of Gunvald breaking down an apartment door—not uncommon for Gunvald—with totally unexpected results.

There's little comic relief, though, in the Sjöwall/Wahlöö books. The themes are serious, and the authors have taken them seriously. Their characters reflect the growing uncertainty about the Swedish welfare state: high unemployment, rootlessness, and an increasing abuse of alcohol and drugs, not to mention the alarming suicide rate which the bureaucrats try to camouflage by manipulating statistics. There are the lunacy and waste of a burgeoning bureaucracy, typified in a new airport, "a dismal and misplaced establishment" that promises to be always in a state of near-completion. And there's concern over the future of the police force, a concern that drove Kollberg to an early retirement: a tendency towards fascism, more and more sophisticated and deadly weaponry, the difficulty of recruiting intelligent and sane young men.

In the final book, Len Kollberg and his wife are playing

cards with Beck and Rhea. The novel ends with the following exchange:

Kollberg: "Violence has rushed like an avalanche throughout the whole of the Western world over the last ten years. You can't stop or steer

that avalanche on your own. . . . The trouble with you, Martin, is just that you've got the wrong job. At the wrong time. In the wrong part of the world. In the wrong system."

To which Martin Beck replies: "Is that all?"

— MYSTERY REVIEWS —

Dame Ngaio Marsh's mystery-writing career spanned more than half a century and included thirty-two novels. Her last one, **The Light Thickens**, has just been published by Little, Brown and Company (\$13.95, 232 pp.). Chief Superintendent Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard enters late in this story of a bloody London production of *Macbeth* that involves a wickedly authentic and ancient "claidheamh-mor." If you've not yet discovered the wonderful Marsh novels, here is an excellent introduction to the works of a lady known for her theatrical mysteries.

There's more cookery than crime in Marion Babson's **Death Warmed Up**, but it's an enjoyable peek behind the scenes of a catering business. Young Jean Ainley is working very hard with her brother and sister-in-law in their fledgling enterprise, dubbed "Meals for Wheels." The last thing they need is a mass outbreak of food poisoning after feeding the attendants at an upper-crust charity ball. Don't hold the recipe for the plot up to close scrutiny and you'll find this contemporary British mystery slides down easily. (Walker and Company, \$11.95, 184 pp.)

Gerald Seymour has written a gripping adventure tale of one young man's courage in a Siberian labor camp. Michael Holly, the English son of naturalized, Russian-born parents, is sloppily recruited and barely trained to make a drop for British Intelligence on a regularly-scheduled business trip to Moscow. He's caught, and a trade falls through when the Russian agent dies in British prison. So Michael Holly begins a fourteen year sentence for espionage, and a tense personal battle with the camp authorities—the fight of the **Archangel**. This is an exciting story of an unusual man who finds love in the most unlikely place of all. (E.P. Dutton, \$14.95, 352 pp.)

The ubiquitous George Bagby (the name of the protagonist and narrator, as well as the author's pen name) turns up again in **The Golden Creep** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95, 179 pp.). Bagby goes slumming in a Times Square strip joint, and wakes up to find himself hospitalized, and the police's most likely suspect in an alley murder. Fortunately, Bagby's police pal helps him discover who really dropped a stone dragon from the roof, fatally beaming a local character known as The Golden Creep. Bagby's breezy style may seem silly to many, but the number of Bagby books indicates a devoted following.

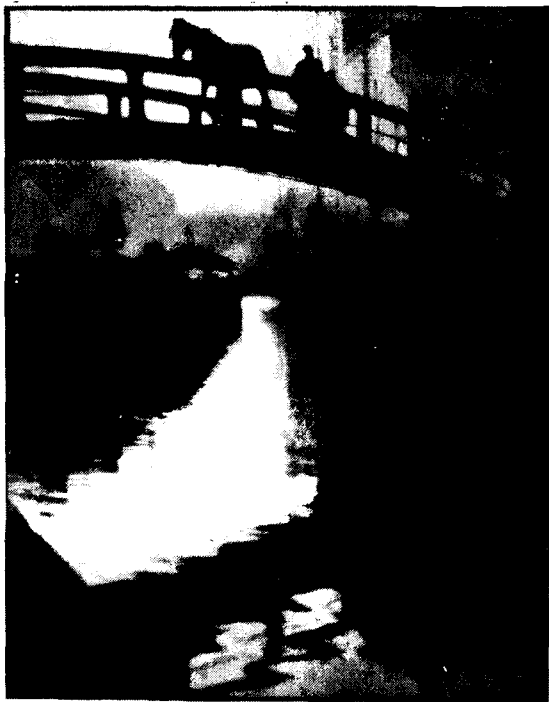
Dell's "Scene of the Crime" mystery series has just published Robert Barnard's **Death of a Perfect Mother**, a chilling psychological study laced with British black humor. Lili Hodsen is one of those loud, self-aggrandizing bullies who manages to make everyone hate her—and who believes instead that she is well-loved. She has her husband cowed, her teenage daughter rebelling, and her two sons—one just out of the army, the other a smart high-schooler—plotting her murder. When Lili is apparently robbed and killed before "her boys" can carry out the deed, there is a general sigh of relief . . . until older son Brian steps into his mother's shoes and starts cracking his own whip. The ending is like a cold hand on one's heart. (\$2.50, 222 pp.)

Two new mysteries by British lady writers both begin with the discovery of a body found floating face down. There the resemblance ends, however. Catherine Aird continues **Last Respects** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95, 177 pp.) by giving Detective Inspector C.D. Sloan a number of seemingly disparate clues: a young girl grieving for a recently deceased aunt and a more recently disappearing fiancé; a nosy old fisherman who turns up a corpse, then turns up *as* a corpse; and a very friendly neighboring widow. The humor is quiet and so is Sloan, who deduces that the boyfriend got into trouble by reading too many true-crime tales. (Reader, beware!)

In **Cast for Death**, on the other hand, Margaret Yorke leads her Oxford don down a merry garden path strewn with grown-up romance, a cheerful vacationing Greek policeman, and a complicated assassination plot. Yorke plays fast and loose, uncannily blending melodrama with existentialist themes—no mean trick, that!—as Dr. Patrick Grant is made to walk a very fine line between the splendid and the silly. I found this undeniably different, and vastly entertaining. (Bantam Books, \$2.25, 168 pp.)

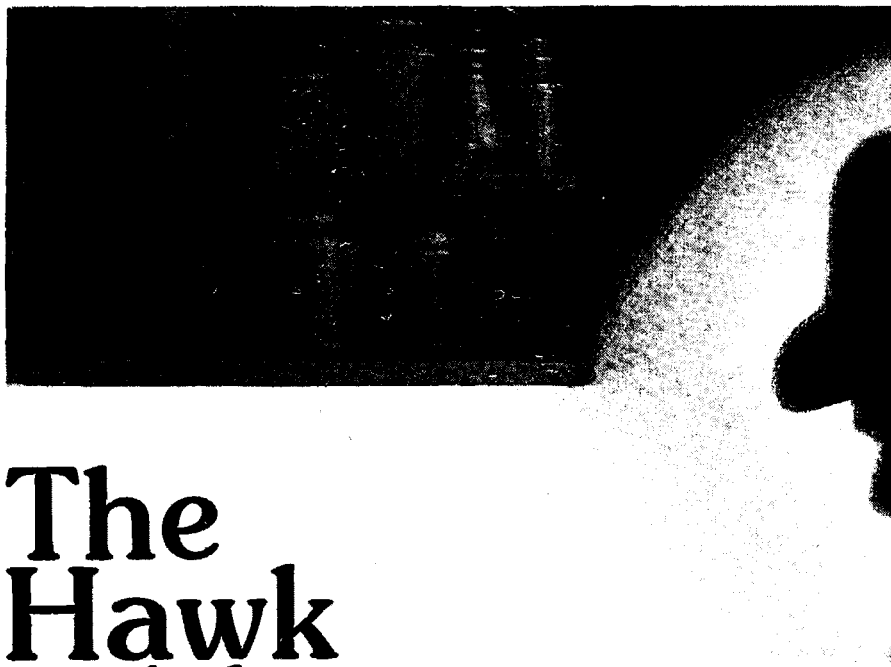
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

Alvin Langdon Coburn. Courtesy of the Permanent Collection of the International Center of Photography, N.Y., N.Y. Gift of June Sidman.



What dark cargo is being ferried where? And whom are the men on the bridge watching for? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017. The winning entry for the Mid-September contest can be found in this issue on page 160.

FICTION



The Hawk and the Working Stiffs

by S.S. Rafferty

Illustration by Mark Fresh

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It was May 1st, and once again, and as she had done every May Day of her married life (less four years when John was away with the Union Army), she was caught up in the moving of her household goods into a new apartment. Now, as she stood amid the confusion and clutter of barrels,

crates, packing boxes, and clumsy cartman's helpers, she was more convinced than ever that the male of the species was decidedly stupid. At least, the men of New York City were, and that included her obstinate husband, Police Captain John Finley.

Elsewhere in what President

Grant had recently called "this fair land of bounty and joy," sane communities were enjoying the breath of new spring. Everywhere else, there were Maypole festivities and relaxation. In New York, however (some said Boston, too), May 1st was Moving Day. And why? Because men were stupid enough to sign yearly leases that all ended on the same day. Fully three-quarters of the renting population moved on that day, bag and baggage, kith and kin, either to escape increased rents (in good times) or to take advantage of rent concessions (in bad ones).

To Tess Finley, it was an absolutely moronic practice, and really benefited only the carters and expressmen, who made easily twenty-five dollars a day at this season. It also gave Trows City Directory a reason to bring out a new edition of folks' addresses each and every year. Well, Tess thought, there's no changing a bad habit that grows into a custom, and besides, she had work to do. First, of course, the entire flat must be scrubbed and cleaned. It was also the custom to leave your dirt behind you, although the flat she had just vacated on Bond Street had been left in mint condition. She couldn't say the same for this Mrs. Margery Daws's household.

The cartmen finally brought

up the last cartons from the charette and stood, hats in hand, waiting for their gratuity.

Some people treated their moving men to a rush at the growler during the unloading, but Tess was firmly of the opinion that carrying mirrors and barrels of crockery didn't mix with a bucket of beer, so she withheld the tip until the very end—it was better to be careful than popular.

When she was finally alone, she wandered through the flat, gauging where work was needed most. There had been moving days since the war when she wished John had taken up the government's bonus of forty acres and a mule. Of course, it would have meant moving into the wilderness, but then, here she was, ten years later, way up on West 24th Street—practically a frontier. She was thankful that John had at least settled for 24th Street. His original plan had called for moving all the way up to those French flats near Central Park! She could just picture herself in the wilds around the Dakota Apartments. Where in heaven did those people shop?

Actually, her new home was a step up from the comfortable but small Bond Street flat. It had two parlors connected by sliding mahogany doors. The front chamber, which the landlord rather pompously called

the drawing room, and the back one, which he called m'lady's parlor, would be called just plain front and back, as far as she was concerned. It also had an extra bedroom that would be a blessing when her sister Amalee visited from Westchester. The kitchen and dining room were adequate, and the maid's quarters could be converted into a sewing room. In fact, Tess Finley would have loved the new place were it not for the knowledge that, in three hundred and sixty-four days, she would be somewhere else, doing exactly the same thing.

Since the movers had been late—as usual—she had had to rush out of the old apartment to get to the new one to pick up the keys, and now, after tallying the crates and boxes as they came in, she had a very short day left. Nonetheless, she meant to take time out for a soothing pot of tea before unpacking the mop and pail. Old moving day veteran that she was, she had made sure that her teapot was the last item to go into the china barrel before John nailed it shut last night. Her only problem was finding John's crowbar.

While she looked for the crowbar, her thoughts drifted back to her childhood days in Westchester, when May 1st meant adorning your new doll with ribbons and parading it

about in a little chair. And when she was older, getting up at dawn to bathe her face in May dew and hope for beauty, and then finding a sprig of elm leaf to ensure that a husband was in your future. She hummed as she searched: "Marry in May and rue the day; wed in June instead."

She had taken the advice, and it had worked. John Finley might be a terror about moving every year, but he was a good, steady man, even if he left her to do the work while he lolled around police headquarters all day. Ah, finally, the crowbar, and soon the tea.

Captain John Finley sat uneasily at the long conference table that took up practically the entire second floor conference room at the Mulberry Street headquarters. He was uneasy because, of all the first-day-of-the-month operational meetings, he hated the one in May most. Of course, he also hated all the last-day-of-the-month staff level meetings, where his brother captains and various inspectors blew their own horns and talked of budgets and manpower allocations.

The one saving grace about the operational meetings was that they were attended by the working stiffes, the sergeants and lieutenants who made the

department function. Despite his rank, Finley considered himself a working stiff. As a working captain, he was an anomaly, a man without a command. His rank was not held at the convenience of the mayor or the board of aldermen. He had been given a permanent captaincy by the governor himself when he came out of the army as "the hero of Bull Run." He was, in effect, a captain-at-large, but he still couldn't avoid the May 1st operational meeting.

First, and by all means foremost, was the lengthy discussion about the Annual Police Parade, held every May 27th come hell or high water. To Finley's thinking, the parade was a lot of peacockery and a misuse of manpower. Half the entire force—fourteen hundred strong—would spend the entire day convincing the citizens and the politicians that they were a solid group of dedicated men.

The parade's logistics and other dull details were being read with excruciating slowness by Lieutenant Howard Metacuew, the officer in charge of the Mounted Squad, who took his annual job as parade coordinator very, very seriously. In fact, he spent the entire year doing nothing else, and leaving the Mounted Squad in the capable hands of an experienced sergeant.

Anyone with a knowledge of

constabulary organization would question why the Mounted Squad, with only thirty-four men, rated the command of a lieutenant in the first place. The answer was simple enough. Here and there throughout the department were holdover plums from the Tammany days, and Metacuew, an alderman's nephew, had picked a juicy one.

Finley often wished that Metacuew had shown the same zeal for parades during the war instead of buying out of the draft. Finley, himself a brevetted major of Union cavalry, disliked Metacuew as he disliked all empty flashiness. He had nicknamed the lieutenant the J.E.B. Stuart of Central Park, and it had stuck. Metacuew was not, technically, a member of the Detective Bureau, and most decidedly not a working stiff. All the other sergeants and lieutenants in the room, even those with quasi-line assignments, were considered primarily detectives. The only detection ever performed by the Mounted Squad was the occasional finding of a missing horse and wagon.

As Metacuew droned to a close, Finley glanced at the man on his right and shrugged his disapproval at their being trapped at this fruitless meeting. The man cocked his head a bit toward Finley and winked.

Damn, Finley thought to himself, he does look like a bird of prey when he does that. The sharp chin, the slender, avian nose, the deep-set eyes: no wonder the newspaper boys called him the Hawk. Finley had worked with Dr. Amos P. Phipps, alienist and department consultant, on a number of sensational cases that had brought them a great deal of notoriety—unwanted in Phipps's case, especially his

our city once more."

A ritual groan went round the table. For several weeks, people would be pouring into the city with banners and placards, decrying the sad moral predicament of the world. No vice or near vice went uncovered: demon rum, tobacco, free love, Darwinism, gambling, prostitution. Nothing was safe from the onslaught of their zeal. With slogans and hymns and brass bands, hundreds of orga-

He looked directly at Finley. "I want no murders in May, and that's flat."

soubriquet, "the hawk of New York." Finley didn't mind being called "the hero of Bull Run" one bit.

The fact of the matter was that Finley felt embarrassed at taking up Phipps's time with this meeting nonsense, but the commissioner had insisted on his presence.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Metacuew," Superintendent Bel-
low was saying. "I'm sure the parade will come off smoothly, as usual. Well, gentlemen, he went on, "here it is May again, and as you all know, the Good Folk will be convening in

nizations would parade and rally and hold mutually supportive prayer meetings in every hall, auditorium, and makeshift tent available. In May, New York was the scene of a modern holy crusade—a scene that was a headache to the men who had to police it.

Lists of the various organizations' meeting schedules were handed around the table, and Finley perused his with his usual ennui. There they were, the cream of American piety, charity, and righteousness. The American Tract Society, the Bible Society, the American

Temperance Union, the Sunday School Union, as well as the Home Missionary Society. And, if that weren't enough, there were also the Board of Foreign Missions and sundry sororities, like the Daughters of the Nile, the Ladies of the Golden Bough, and the Maidens of the Weckquasgecks.

When Finley's eyes fell upon the name of the last group, he gave such a start that Dr. Phipps leaned over and whispered with concern, "Are you all right?"

"No," said Finley with a low growl.

He pointed to the last organization. "The Maidens of the Weckquasgecks," he said in despair, "is Amalee Runsecker's, my sister-in-law's, club and, damn it, I now have a spare bedroom!"

The commissioner had just been introduced. "Fellows," he was saying, "I mean no disrespect to the superintendent, but we shouldn't be calling these people 'do-gooders' like it was some kind of mangle. Hell, fellows, we're supposed to be do-gooders, too, aren't we?" Police Commissioner Daniel "Danny Boy" Doyle was into another morale talk. "Now, I know you're all doing a swell job, but while these *guests* are here, I want the lid put on. No sensational headlines." He looked directly at Finley. "I want no murders in May, and that's flat. And I

also want all the special squads to ensure order in their respective areas. Vice, crime, and corruption are going to be handled quietly."

Danny Boy flashed his famous grin around the table at the lieutenants and sergeants who headed special details. There were Sergeant Jesse Wister of the Steamboat Squad, assigned to waterfront crime; Lieutenant Toots Corkin of the crack Broadway Squad; Sergeant Big Boy Young of the Five Points detail; and Sergeant Nick Cestucci of the Italian Squad (he also took care of Chinatown, since he had grown up on the Chinatown-Little Italy border and spoke both languages). On the other side of the table were Lieutenants Broder of Bunco, Medfield of Vice, and Coogan, who wore double hats on Grand Larceny and Arson. Last, but not least, was the department's all-around utility man, Sergeant Ed Grier, who handled the inside chores: missing persons, lost children, morgue relations, and the like. These men formed the core of the new post-Tammany police force, seasoned, honest, and dedicated, and certainly not in need of parades. But parades and politically-appointed commissioners went with the territory, so they all gave Danny Boy their rapt attention.

All except Finley, whose mind

was still on Amalee Runsecker. He hardly heard a word of the commissioner's speech. Not that it mattered much. He couldn't put a lid on murder no matter what he did. The commissioner finished at last, and the special instructions were being read by the headquarters clerk when a patrolman entered the room and handed Finley a note:

John:

Come home at once. My best china has been stolen.

Tess

Normally, Finley would have ignored Tess's plight and left the theft in the hands of the beat patrolman, but here was a fine chance to escape this boring meeting and he took it. He took not only the chance, but Dr. Phipps as well.

In the hall, they found Sergeant Binabee waiting for them. "You saved our lives, Binabee," Finley said with gratitude. "We'd have been in there for hours. Be a good fellow and go over to West 24th Street and look into this missing china that my wife's so upset about. The expressmen probably misplaced the barrel."

Binabee read Tess Finley's note and gave his superior a perplexed look. "I don't understand, sir," he said. "The beat patrolman who brought the note

said that your china barrel contains a female corpse."

It was after six o'clock before the daylight started to fade and the gaslights had to be lit in the Finley back parlor. Brinze, the coroner's man, had come and gone, the body had been removed, photographs had been taken, and Tess Finley, still in shock, was resting at a neighbor's, one floor below.

Finley and Phipps were just getting started on an examination of the china barrel when footsteps on the uncarpeted floor drew their eyes to the foyer doorway. It was Superintendent Bellow, a rare visitor to crime scenes.

"Hello, Frank," Finley said warily. "Nice of you to drop by. Sorry about ducking out of the meeting." He had great respect for Frank Bellow. The man was unusual among superintendents of recent memory. He was an honest, knowledgeable, and hardworking policeman.

"Good evening, captain, Dr. Phipps," Bellow nodded, and stepped into the room. Normally a pleasant, affable person, Bellow looked stern, almost suspicious. "That it?" He pointed his walking stick at the barrel.

"Yes, sir," Finley said, taking his cue from Bellow's formality. "It sure looks like mine, but then there are probably ten thousand like it in the city. We

were just starting . . .” Finley stopped. “All right, superintendent, something is wrong so I might as well hear it. Is Commissioner Doyle steamed because I *allowed* a murder in May?”

“Captain,” Bellow said, with obvious discomfort, “I’ve got to take you off this case.”

Finley was more irritated than angry. “Oh, for the love of Mike, how petty can Doyle be? The doctor and I were just laying out a course of inquiry and . . .”

“It’s not Doyle, it’s *me*. Be sensible, John. The body was found in your home by your own wife. How can you possibly be objective?”

Dr. Phipps, who had thought it best to remain silent, now joined in. “We were working on the theory that the barrels were either purposely switched or accidentally mixed up before delivery, superintendent. I believe a straightforward investigation of the carting company employees will put us on the right track. You certainly don’t suspect either of the Finleys.”

“Personally? Of course I don’t, but this goes beyond me, and besides, there are some facts you may not know.”

“They must have identified the body,” Finley said, more to Phipps than to Bellow.

“Correct.”

“And who is she?”

“You’re not going to like it, John.”

“I saw the corpse and she was unknown to me. I saw that she had been stabbed repeatedly in the stomach, was in her early forties, and wore quality clothes. Who was she, superintendent, and *why* won’t I like it?”

“The woman was Madame Adela deRies. You know, the DeRies Academy for Young Ladies on Fifth Avenue. Very posh and proper and, I might add, a pillar of moral rectitude.”

“So it *is* Doyle. Him and his Good Folk fears.”

“I said it’s me, not Doyle, who’s taking you off the case. Why you won’t like it, John, is that we have reason to believe that Mrs. Finley visited the dead woman two days ago. You see, there is a connection that can’t be ignored. Since everyone else is tied up with the do-gooders, I’m forced to put Metacue on the case immediately, and you’ll take over the parade coordination. No arguments, John. The order stands.”

When the working stiffs met outside of Central Station, it was invariably in the back room of Joey Finn’s Gold Shield Saloon at the corner of Mulberry and Bayard Streets. Finn, a retired detective, opened the front bar to one and all: lawyers, politicians, gamblers,

pimps, even commissioners. The back room, however, was restricted to current and former members of the metropolitan detective bureau. The term metropolitan police was rarely used around headquarters because it reminded the brass, painfully, of the dark days of '57 when things got so corrupt under Fernando Woods's administration that the governor had stepped in, transferred all police authority to the state, and formed the Metropolitan Force. Even though the "metros" were no more, the spectre of their return kept the politicians reasonably honest, and the working stiff used the old title among themselves with pride.

As for Finn's inner sanctum, there was nothing very elaborate about it. Several poker tables, a collection of chairs, and, of course, the daguerreotype of old Jake Hay that hung in a place of honor over the fireplace. Finn revered Jacob H. Hay, who had been the high constable of New York in the 1820's and was considered the city's first detective. He reveled in telling new men in the bureau how old Jake went about the city unarmed except for a walking staff, which he could use masterfully when required. Finn also took pleasure in recalling Jake Hay's unique and effective method for breaking

down a killer. During interrogation, when the suspect was off guard, Hay would suddenly produce the victim's corpse and toss it into the suspect's arms. He never failed to get a signed confession.

Usually a gathering of working stiff concentrated on tapping a keg and trading case yarns, but on the night after the discovery of the body in Finley's crockery barrel, the group in Finn's back room was strictly in working session.

Toots Corkin, as senior lieutenant-in-grade, assumed the chairmanship of the discussion. "All you fellows know the Haw—er, Dr. Phipps here, and you know what this meeting is all about. John Finley's on the shelf in this deRies murder and his missus is under suspicion, so it's up to us to get this thing solved. God knows, J.E.B. Stuart Metacuew never will. I was going to ask Moses Binabee to give us the latest rundown, but he isn't here yet. Binabee is our ace in the hole because he's still on the case, even though Finley is off. Though why I'm helping John Finley after he stole Mo Binabee away from the Broadway Squad, I'll never know." He turned to Sergeant Grier, the headquarters utility man. "How far can you fill us in, Ed?"

"Pretty much up to date. As you all know, there's a publicity lid on the murder for the time

being, though if Doyle thinks he can hide it for the entire month, he's crazy. The coroner fixes death at sometime after midnight on May 1st, from multiple abdominal slash wounds. The woman must have been on her way to visit a child because a small doll was found in her purse. Her servants say she left the school at nine that night. She was often gone overnight, so they didn't consider it strange when she didn't return. The next time they saw her was at the morgue."

"Now that's what buffaloes me," Big Boy Young bellowed. "How did the morgue get an immediate identification, and how did Doyle get hold of it *before* the department did?" Young punctuated the word "before" by pounding his fist on the table, which set all parties to stabilizing their schooners of suds. With the exception of Phipps, the group was used to this sort of thing. It was expected of a six foot eight giant, although little appreciated by the hooligans, toughs, and rowdy boys of Five Points, where Young hung his iron-lined bowler.

"I wondered myself," Grier said. "It seems that when they were taking the body up to the morgue at Bellevue, one of the staff nurses recognized her. Brinze, the coroner's man, says he told his chief attendant to pass the information along to

Finley, but of course, we all know why that wasn't done."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Phipps said, "but I seem to have missed a point there. Why wasn't it?"

"Sorry, doctor, you haven't been on the city payroll long enough yet to know one Indian from another. Mickey Noonan, the chief morgue attendant, happens to be the brother-in-law of Alderman Sadlak, who is the law partner of our own Danny Boy Doyle."

"It's quite an oligarchy, I see."

"Doctor, that crowd could give the ancient Greeks a few lessons," Cork assured him. "So toady Noonan tells Doyle that there might be a society lady at the morgue and . . ."

". . . and," Grier interrupted him, "he gets his pet Metacuew to bring in one of the lady's servants, who makes the positive identification."

"Sergeant Grier," Phipps said, "Superintendent Bellow seems to have decided to take Captain Finley off the case because Mrs. Finley was in some way recently connected with the dead woman. Has that been substantiated?"

"Here's where my information starts to wear a bit thin, doctor. As I get it, when this Madame deRies's servant—her butler, actually—was at the morgue, he heard it mentioned

that the body was found by a Mrs. Finley. According to the butler, a Mrs. Finley called on Madame deRies two days before the murder. That's about all I got before the lid slammed shut. Now, Moses Binabee is still on the case . . ."

"Oh, no, I'm not," said a voice from the doorway. Binabee walked across the sawdust-covered floor and joined the assemblage. "I've been reassigned to the Broadway Squad for the month of May."

After the shock of the newcomer's news had worn off, Toots Corkin asked, "Did you pick up anything fresh before you were sent back to me, Mo?"

"Very little, except that I got to talk to the deRies woman's butler. He's one of those fancy English types, snobby, but seems on the up and up. He says Tess Finley delivered a note by hand, which she said was from a Mrs. Steegh of New Rochelle. She didn't see Madame deRies personally, just left the note. The butler didn't see anything strange in that, since the swells are always hand-delivering notes like they didn't trust the post office."

"Well, what does Tess Finley say?" queried Lieutenant Medfield of Vice. Binabee's expression was pained. He seemed to speak directly to Phipps.

"She doesn't say anything.

She just sits there at the neighbor's flat, drinking tea and demanding that her china be found. Doctor, could this have unhinged her?"

"The trauma of finding a corpse where you expected your china to be can produce a temporary hysteria. I didn't realize it had affected her so deeply. I'll have to stop by and see her tonight. Tell us, Sergeant Binabee, does this New Rochelle woman agree that she sent Mrs. Finley the letter to be delivered to Madame deRies?"

"I got the heave-ho before I could follow it up, but if she did send it, I have a suspicion that it can't be found. Metacuew is tearing that mansion apart looking for something."

"Well, we have a job of work to do, boys," Corkin said, "but before we start laying out a plan, I think we ought to hear from the doctor, since he and Finley always work together with great success. Doctor?"

"Thank you, lieutenant. As you might know, Captain Finley and I actually complement each other's skills. He would be the first to admit that his contribution lies in the collection and analysis of hard evidence, while my part—and it is, indeed, a meager one—is with the psychological aspects of a case. When we mix the two, we usually come up with an answer."

Big Boy Young pointed to the

fireplace wall. "Psychological? You mean like old Jake Hay up there? Tossing corpses at killers?"

Phipps smiled. "In a sense, yes. Thoreau says that men live lives of quiet desperation. That desperation can lead them to commit unspeakable acts, sometimes even to themselves. Yes, Jacob Hay would have made an excellent forensic alienist. But you have evidence to collect, Lieutenant Corkin."

"That we have. Now, before we hand out assignments, let's see who's got spare time, with all of us protecting the do-gooders from sin and degradation. For myself, I'm pretty much tied up because most of the parades and rallies will be along Broadway. Since Doyle tossed Binabee off the case and into my lap, however, he's free for assignment. How about you, Medfield, has vice been eradicated from the city?"

"Pretty much. The street-walkers have been warned, and the egyptienne parlors are closed and the dancers packed off to Jersey, but you know these slimy people, Toots, they have to be watched. I can't spare any men, but I'll handle anything on the side myself."

"Okay. Jesse Wister, how many can you spare from Steamboat?"

On it went around the table. Four detectives and Binabee

were finally agreed on, and the plan of inquiry was broached.

"It might be coincidence," Nick Cestucci ventured, "but it bothers me that the nurse at Bellevue recognized the corpse as it was brought in."

"We all know Finley's Homicide Rule Number One," Binabee said. "In murder cases . . ."

"THERE ARE NO COINCIDENCES." Several voices joined in the response.

"Right," Corkin said, putting "nurse follow-up" on his list. "Now, there's this barrel mixup. Either it *is* Finley's barrel and the body was put in after the china had been taken out, or Finley's barrel was switched with the one containing the corpse. My guess is that the barrels were switched somewhere between Bond Street and 24th. So the carting company and the crew have to be checked to see if they made any stops along the way. They probably came right up Broadway—my beat men can make inquiries at the saloons along the way. The foreign butler's background looks like your baby, Ed Grier, since headquarters is tied in with Immigration. And that brings us to the New Rochelle lady."

"I'll take that," Tom Medfield of Vice volunteered. "I know the police chief up there, so there won't be any fireworks about out-of-jurisdiction inves-

tigations getting back to Doyle."

"That's the crop, except for where the headmistress spent her evenings away from home. Maybe she had a Johnny-boy stashed away someplace. Maybe you ought to field that instead of New Rochelle, Tom. Your vice folks keep tabs on fortune hunters."

"I can handle both."

"Fine, then we can get crackin'. We should meet here tomorrow night and . . ."

"Beg pardon, lieutenant," Binabee interrupted, "but that might not be a good idea. On my way in here, I noticed Jimmy Cuhaine, one of Doyle's cronies, at the bar. They could be keeping tabs on us."

"Probably are," Corkin grumped. "Any better ideas?"

"I might suggest my rooms in Copley Mews," Phipps proffered. "Even if one of you were observed, you could always say you were seeing me professionally."

Everyone grinned, since it was inconceivable that any of them would ever need the services of a "head doctor." The proposal was accepted, however, and it was agreed that all information would be funnelled through the house on 13th Street.

"All right, that's it, so let's go to it. Oh, excuse me, doctor, did you have anything else to add?"

"Just a few minor points.

First, the doll that was found in the barrel with the body. Could we ascertain if it was store-bought or homemade, and approximately how old it is?"

Corkin and the rest were taken aback—it seemed a frivolous request—but they assured Phipps that his question would be answered. "Ah, anything else, doctor?" Corkin asked him warily.

"Of course there is, gentlemen. We have a direct request from Tess Finley. Where is her china?"

Before retiring to his rooms after the meeting, Phipps went to West 24th Street to look in on Mrs. Finley. As Binabee had reported, he found her in a sorry state.

She sat in an easy chair in her bedroom, staring fixedly into space, and made no response to his questions. After a brief observation, the doctor joined Captain Finley, who was entertaining a middle-aged clergyman in the front parlor. The man was introduced as the Reverend Mr. Marsh.

"It appears to be acute hysteria," Phipps said in answer to Finley's question, "brought on by the shock of finding the body. I hope it will be transitory."

"Oh, dear me," Mr. Marsh said with concern. "I don't like

the sound of that 'I hope,' doctor. Certainly the shock will wear off in time."

"I don't mean to be an alarmist, Mr. Marsh, but I have to take a conservative view. The psyche is a frail fabric."

"Nothing frail about my Tess," John Finley said, "at least not till now. She's made of strong stuff, doctor, and she's not the type to swoon at the sight of a corpse, much less get hysterical."

"I agree about her constitutional strength," Mr. Marsh said warmly. "In our charity work among the poor, I have never seen Mrs. Finley so much as flinch at a distasteful situation. Could there be another reason, doctor?"

"Well, the fixation with finding her dishes is clinically interesting. Somehow she has closed her mind to the murder and centered on that one thought alone. But why she has done so is inexplicable."

Mr. Marsh leaned forward in his chair and patted Finley's knee. "With God's help, John, and our prayers, she will recover. I must be going now. Can I drop you somewhere, doctor?"

Phipps accepted the ride and was somewhat surprised to find himself in a fine carriage costing far more than the average clergyman could afford. Mr. Marsh explained with a chuckle. "Not mine. One of my pa-

rishioners puts it at my disposal. St. Dominic's on the Square is a wealthy congregation, and although they don't believe in paying their pastoral leader much, they don't want the world to know it. Pity my late wife isn't here to enjoy it.

"You are an alienist, are you not, Dr. Phipps?" he went on as they turned onto Broadway. "I'm afraid I can't agree with all this science of the mind business. Trouble is, we are making our world too complex for our own good."

The carriage had reached the intersection at 18th Street, where it was halted while a torchlight parade passed by. It was another of the religious groups on its way to still another rally, singing the obligatory "Onward Christian Soldiers."

Phipps looked out at the spirited marchers and said, "*Vox populi, vox Dei.*"

"How true," Mr. Marsh beamed. "The voice of the people is the voice of God. I see you know your Albinus Flaccus, doctor. One doesn't find much appreciation of the classical in men of science."

Phipps sat back and watched the procession and smiled to himself. Yes, he thought, he was up in his classics, and he had always felt that, for a medieval ecclesiastic, Flaccus had that line the wrong way around.

The third day of May turned unseasonably cold, and Mrs. Downs, Phipps's housekeeper, had laid a fire in his front room office-parlor. Over his morning coffee, he searched through the annals of *Medica Psychologiquies* in a vain effort to find a case corresponding to Tess Finley's. He was about to delve into Krinsky's work on hypnotism when Mrs. Downs announced, first, Lieutenant Corkin, and then, moments later, Lieutenant Tom Medfield of Vice. Toots Corkin had just begun his report when Medfield entered. As always, Corkin looked resplendent in his uniform, a walking advertisement for the famed, tall, goodlooking men of the Broadway Squad. Medfield, on the other hand, was in civilian clothes, tired, and in need of a shave.

"You look like something the cat refused to drag in, Tom," Corkin said.

"Lo, Toots, doctor. Just got back from New Rochelle. I went up last night after our meeting."

Phipps sat upright in his chair. "If you don't mind delaying your report, Lieutenant Corkin, I'd like to hear what Mrs. Steegh had to say."

Corkin gestured gallantly to Medfield, who spoke.

"Mrs. Steegh says she never sent a letter to Mrs. Finley. In

fact, she doesn't even know her very well except that she and Mrs. Finley's sister belong to the Maidens of something or other. I wrote it down."

"Weckquasgecks," Phipps said.

"That's the one. The Steegh woman says she has met Tess Finley only once in her life, and that was through the sister. It was a simple how-do-you-do type of thing. As for Madame deRies, Mrs. Steegh has never heard of her."

"Could she be lying?"

"I'd say she wasn't, doctor. After a few years on the force, you get a sixth sense about people. Still, the deRies butler confirms that a letter from her came, via Mrs. Finley."

"And Tess Finley is still suffering from acute hysteria and cannot communicate intelligently."

"Is it serious? I mean, she's going to be all right, isn't she?" Medfield was visibly concerned.

"Among us three, I have to confess that I really don't know. Mental stability is a delicate balance. Only time will tell."

"Well, while we girls are letting our hair down," Corkin interjected, "sooner or later, someone has got to put a painful and obvious question. Is Tess involved in the case beyond having the body dumped in her parlor? Sorry, men, but it's got to be dealt with."

"You put it with proper candor, sir," Phipps said somberly. "I'm sure, as professional detectives, it crossed everyone's mind last night, and Lieutenant Medfield's report further clouds the issue."

"You are certainly not suggesting that she killed the deRies woman!" Medfield said. "My report doesn't implicate her at all. It's my theory that someone sent her a bogus letter that she delivered innocently, thinking it was from Mrs. Steegh."

"Of course, of course," Phipps calmed him. "I just can't square it with her initial reaction to the body, which brought on her present condition."

"Well, if she is involved," said Toots Corkin, "I'll be damned if we are going to collect evidence to prove it. We might be better off letting Metacuew chase his tail and see the whole affair dumped into the unsolved case file."

"Except," Phipps cautioned, "that if she is *not* involved, a killer goes free."

"Some of them do, doctor. Maybe not so many since you and John Finley teamed up, but there have always been some cases that slip through the cracks, and we could just sit back and let this be one of them."

Before Phipps could reply, there was a tap at the door and

Mrs. Downs handed in a letter that had come by special messenger. Phipps read the short note and then looked up at his guests with a dumfounded expression. "It seems," he said, "that, due to budgeting problems, my services as a police consultant have been suspended until further notice."

"Signed by Daniel Doyle, of course," Corkin ventured. "That completes the package. You're out, Johnny Finley is out, and for fear of blowing the whistle on Tess Finley, the working stiff's are now out. Case closed! By the way, doctor, I just dropped by to tell you that my lads roused the carters who moved the Finleys from Bond Street. Damn near had to knock a few heads together, but the driver finally said that his horse lamed up and while he walked it back to the stable for a fresh one, his helpers left the charrette sitting by itself in an alley behind 18th Street. They went off to pay a call on a nearby saloon. That's where the switch could have been made. But it's all academic now."

"It's also against Finley's first rule of homicide investigations, isn't it? There are no coincidences!"

Corkin looked at him wryly. "You mean that horses just don't happen to go lame in front of 18th Street alleys. A defense attorney could make hay with

it, though." He winked at Phipps. "Let's let the *official* investigator do his inept job and kiss the case goodbye."

"I agree," Medfield nodded. "Let us not put John's wife in jeopardy. I'm sure he'd agree, too. Well, gentlemen, I've been up all night and I have a squad to run, so I must be on my way."

As he reached the door, he turned back to Phipps. "Do your best for Tess, doctor, and tell John when you see him I'll have the vicar mention her name in the offertory."

When he had gone, Phipps commented on the anomaly of an obviously religious man heading a vice squad.

"Oh, Tom Medfield was as big a rip as the rest of us, but like myself, he got religion after he lost his wife," Corkin explained. "Hell, for a while there, I was more righteous than any of the Good Folk. That's why we all feel protective about Tess Finley. She and Johnny have a model marriage and we wouldn't do anything to disturb it. A policeman's wife is a truly special creature, doctor. Speaking of the Good Folk, I must get a move on." He got to his feet and tugged his tunic smooth. "I have two parades, four rallies, an outdoor baptism, and probably a dozen demonstrations in front of saloons to look after."

"Lieutenant Corkin, out of curiosity, did anyone check on

the doll that was found with the body?"

"Binabee was working on that angle." The head of the Broadway Squad looked at Phipps suspiciously. "I hope you're not planning to go ahead with the investigation on your own."

"Without an official standing, I wouldn't get very far, I'm afraid. But as a doctor, I'm still ethically bound to cure my patient."

"That's the ticket. Curing her is the most important thing. The murder investigation will wither on the vine all by itself."

Yes, curing Tess *was* the most important factor, Phipps thought to himself after Corkin's departure, but all his medical training and instincts told him that her return to normality was inexplicably bound up somehow in the return of her china. He knew, however, as did the working stiff, that it was impossible to confine himself to finding it. To uncover one thing meant uncovering everything; to uncover everything might jeopardize his best friend's wife. He sat moodily contemplating the quandary well into the late afternoon when Sergeant Binabee, unaware that the working stiff had withdrawn from the case, showed up, a box under his arm and a smile of achievement on his face.

"The stiffs can drop out, doctor, but Moses Binabee sticks," he said proudly when informed. "And I have a feeling you're of the same persuasion, or will be when you hear what I have to say."

"By all means, proceed."

"First off," Binabee said, taking the top off the box, "this is no ordinary doll. I described it to my mother, and she tells me it's a May doll. It's an old custom that modern girls don't follow much any more, but it was still popular twenty years ago. On May Day, the youngsters dress the dolls and drape the necks with a new white elm leaf—just like this one. I tell you, doctor, this case has something to do with May 1st. It's sort of a . . . a . . ."

"Symbol," Phipps suggested. "Sergeant, I think you have made an important contribution here." He thought for a moment and then took down a large book. "Yes, not Moving Day, but May Day. 'A holiday spanning history and cultures, from the Roman Floralia to Druidic feasts of the god Bel,'" he read, "'and later Christianized as a homage to the Madonna and Child.'"

Binabee looked overwhelmed. "I didn't mean to go *that* far, bringing in the Romans and all. You see, I read that monograph of yours on the Penny Dreadful murders case

where you say the murderer consciously or unconsciously wants to be caught. I just figured maybe the doll is a clue to the killer's identity."

Phipps was touched by the sergeant's admission, since few of the men in the department could be accused of intellectualism. "I'm truly flattered, sergeant. However, the Dreadful case was one of multiple murders with a common signature left at the scene. This doll, if it is a symbol, might have meant something only to the victim or the killer. By the way, how did you come by the doll?"

"I sort of *borrowed* it from the evidence box. Metacuew doesn't see anything in it, anyway. I hear around headquarters that the damned fool is working on the theory that Madame deRies was the victim of a gang of crooked carters. Doesn't that beat all!"

"Yes, but we can hardly mock him, since we have no operating theory at all." He was holding the doll as he spoke, casually fingering the elm leaf. "Did you say a new leaf of the white elm, sergeant?"

"So my mother says. Why?"

"Botany was a childhood hobby of mine, and if memory serves, this is not the leaf of the *Ulmus americana*, or white elm."

"Sure looks like an elm leaf to me."

"Oh, it *is* the leaf of a genus of elm, all right, but not *Ulmus americana*. Forgive me, sergeant, I sometimes get preoccupied with details. It's the curse of the scientific mind's desire for harmony. If the doll is indeed a symbol of May Day to the killer, one would expect him to be consistent with local customs, and the white elm is a common variety of shade tree in the city."

Phipps set the doll on the desk and returned to the rows of books. After studying their titles and selecting one, he returned to his desk and rifled pages until he found what he was looking for. He compared the leaf around the doll's neck with a page of leaf drawings, then murmured, "The deadly buds of May."

"Got something, doctor?"

"I don't know. It could be a case of botanical ignorance on the killer's part or . . ." he hesitated for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice took on an ominous tone, "or a diabolical sense of imagery." Suddenly he was on his feet, pulling on a topcoat.

"Where are we going, doctor?"

"We? Sorry, sergeant, but I will be following a line of inquiry best kept to myself for the moment. If my suspicions prove true, I will be faced with an ethical decision I cannot allow you

to be burdened with. However, you can be of help."

"At your service, sir."

"We still don't know where Madame deRies spent her nights away from home. It has been suggested that she had a lover, and if that surmise is true, he would be a prime suspect. Could your time be spent on that problem without compromising yourself with your associates?"

"The stiff? I said I was with you come hell or high water."

"Excellent. Where will you start?"

"Well, she didn't keep a carriage, so wherever she went, she had to take a hack or hire a rig privately from a stable. I spent years on the Broadway Squad, and the hackies owe me a lot of favors. I think I'll start collecting. Where can I catch up with you?"

"Difficult to say. My first stop is at Bellevue Hospital, and I have to see Mrs. Finley."

"Aha, you're going after the nurse who so conveniently identified the body."

"Not exactly, Sergeant Binabee. My primary objective at Bellevue is the morgue and, I hope, the unclaimed corpse of Madame deRies. We'd best leave the house separately, don't you think?"

Phipps preferred to be on his way first, so Binabee waited a few minutes in the doctor's rooms. Before he left, he al-

lowed his curiosity to overcome him enough to draw him to Phipps's desk, where the book he had just referred to lay open to a page of drawings of tree leaves under the title "Ulma (Elm)."

Binabee picked up the May doll and tried to match the leaf around its neck to the leaves on the page. There were several of them: *Ulmus procera* (English elm), *Ulmus glabra* (Scotch elm), *Ulmus parvifolia* (Chinese elm), *Ulmus pulila* (Siberian elm), *Ulmus ruba* (slippery elm), *Ulmus americana* (white elm).

Binabee's inexperienced eye found little difference among any of the leaves, and he gave up trying to figure out what had set the Hawk flapping off. And besides, he thought, the doc was a brilliant man but no one had ever solved a crime out of a book, and no one ever would. Trained in the Finley school of thought about detective work, Binabee knew that results came from shoe leather on the cobblestones and lots of questions for lots of people. He put on his derby and left to do both.

Despite the ever-lengthening spring daylight, the grey, overcast sky caused Bellevue's gas jets to be ablaze at four P.M. when Dr. Phipps walked from the emergency rooms towards the section of the sprawling in-

stitution that housed the morgue. He had just finished a conversation that either made a great deal of sense or was a packet of lies, and he wasn't quite sure which to accept.

"But Dr. Phipps," Nurse Emma Donnelly had told him imperiously, "all corpses come in through the emergency entrance. I knew Madame deRies by sight from the Hospital Visitors' League tours. Why is it strange that I identified her? It was corroborated by her servant."

Now, as he walked down the tiled tunnel that connected the morgue to the main hospital, Phipps felt he had to agree with Nurse Donnelly. There was nothing strange at all in her recognizing a member of an important hospital committee. In fact, it would have been odd had she, or any other hospital staff member, *not* recognized Adela deRies.

He found himself both amused and fascinated at how Finley's "no coincidences" rule kept proving itself. Seconds later, his amusement was washed away by a new wave of frustration.

"Of course she's been claimed," Brinze grumped. "She was moved to Ronan's Funeral Home last night on the mayor's orders, and buried this morning. Now, if hizzoner would be good enough to get rid of a few

more of my customers, I'd be grateful for the table space."

They were standing just inside the long, cold, stone-walled room where the cadavers were displayed on tiled tables, unshrouded from the neck up and constantly sprayed with cold water from jets suspended from the ceiling. Along the front wall were abutting two-over-two frosted panes of glass that admitted an eerie light from the outside corridor. On the rear wall, the clothing of the dead hung from S-hooks, like motley goods in some shabby second-hand shop.

"Yes, you do seem full up," Phipps said, trying to conceal his irritation at having missed the opportunity to examine the deRies corpse. Now, nothing less than a court order (which was politically impossible) could repair the damage.

"I thought the city administration had banned murders in May," he said, sarcastically.

Brinze gave his grey, sombre face the semblance of a smile—a great deal of mirth for him, at that. "Heard about it. Peculiar thing is, there haven't been that many homicides. Just the Chinese fellow and the plug-ugly on tables two and three. The rest are the flotsam and jetsam of the city, so to speak. Say, wait a minute. The Chinese fellow doesn't even count. He was dead on April 29th, but his body

wasn't found until yesterday."

"River?"

"No, it was found in a straw hamper down at the docks. You know, those big ones the commercial laundries use. Tagged for shipment back to China, of all things. The odor attracted too much attention, though. Looks like your girlfriend is City Hall's only murder embarrassment, except for the plug-ugly. Why did you want to examine her, anyway? It's obvious that she died of multiple slash wounds."

"I suppose you did not perform an autopsy, then?"

"No need. We had the *mortis causa*."

Phipps did not attempt to correct the man's Latin any more than he could correct the gross inadequacies of the morgue's scientific capability. The facility was really nothing more than a holding station for the dead until identified and claimed, or sent off to potter's field.

"How old would you say she had been?"

"Well into her thirties. Maybe even forty. Hard to tell in the modern woman."

"Then a pregnancy was possible."

"You know, Dr. Phipps, I don't know what they teach you people in those fancy European schools, but I didn't get my training out of *Buckin's Do-*

mestic Medicine, either. This was a high-born maiden lady who . . .”

The coroner’s man’s lecture on morality was mercifully interrupted by the entrance of a short, barrelchested man who sported a luxuriant set of mustachios. Phipps recognized him as one of the working stiffes, Sergeant Nick Cestucci of the Italian and Chinatown Squads.

“Well, Cestucci, it’s about time,” Brinze snarled, turning his indignation toward the other man. “I sent a note over to headquarters on the Chinese two days ago. Why we have to hold all the corpses from your district until you see them is beyond me.

“You hardly ever solve any of the murders.”

Cestucci’s black eyes glistened with a suggestion of mockery. “I just like to know who’s dead and who ain’t. Keeps my records straight.” He started down the row of tables to the one containing the only Oriental in the room.

“Know him?” Brinze asked. “Hell, even if you don’t, say you do. I need the tables.”

“How?” Cestucci inquired.

“Stabbed in the back. Robbery, maybe. Know him?”

“Yes. Goes by the name of Kee Wong. Been around a long, long time. Had a little shop off Pell Street. He was in the medical business, in a way.”

“In what way, sergeant?” Phipps asked.

“Oh, he wasn’t a sawbones like you fellows. There’s a word for it in Mandarin, but I forget it. I don’t sabby Mandarin anyway. He was more a druggist; you know, berries and barks . . .”

“An herbalist,” Phipps suggested.

“That’s it. Cured people with roots and flowers, or at least the patient thought he did.”

“Herbal medicine has some very practical applications.” Phipps regarded Brinze. “You say he died on the 29th?”

“Yes, sometime in the early morning. Any suspects, Cestucci?”

“About a thousand,” the man shrugged. “Could be anyone who lost a relative under his care. It’s a lucky thing for you white doctors that the patients don’t seek revenge.”

“Or try to ship us back to our place of birth,” Phipps observed, and Brinze recounted the circumstances under which the body had been discovered.

“Damned strange,” was Cestucci’s comment, after a few moments’ thoughtful consideration. “If it was a revenge killing, the last thing a Chinese would do is hide the body. He would want all of Chinatown to know he had righted the wrong. Well, I’ll nose around the district and maybe get a lead.”

"Say, Cestucci," Brinze said before the man left. "You couldn't oblige me with a tag for the plug-ugly on table three, could you? He was stabbed, too."

"Sure, and you can ship him out to potter's on the next wagon, 'cause nobody will be around to claim him."

"You really recognize him?"

"Not by name, but look at the knuckles on his right hand, the crisscross scars. He's one of the old Mickey Shagrue gang. 'The Thumpers,' they called themselves back before the war. Johnny Finley was in Five Points then and broke them up, put a hole in Shagrue's head at thirty feet. This hooligan was a Thumper, all right. Well, Brinze, now that I've cleared up all your problems, I'll make out the identification tag on Kee Wong and see if he belonged to any of the burial societies these people have." Cestucci glanced at Phipps and smiled. "Heard you got put on vacation, doc. What brings you down here?"

"I was tying off some loose ends," Phipps said, looking over Cestucci's broad shoulder as he wrote.

"He wondered if the woman were pregnant," Brinze snorted.

"Ah, *amore*," Cestucci said with a leerish grin. "Ah, *passione* . . . oops, *bambino*! You think she was storked and then kipped to keep her from iden-

tifying the papa? Happens to shopgirls, doc, not to ladies."

"I suppose so," Phipps said politely, and excused himself.

Once on the street, he hailed a hack and gave the driver the Chinatown address he had read over Cestucci's shoulder.

"Pell Alley?" the hackie asked, flicking his horse into movement. "Must be off Pell Street some'ers, we'll find it, sir. Git, Nessie." To himself, he muttered, "This fellow's out for no good. Chinatown!"

As Phipps sat swaying left and then right in the rhythm of the ill-sprung cab, he found himself in a sort of emotional pendulum as well, cutting an arc from anger to satisfaction. Anger at Brinze's condescending attitude about the pregnancy question, and Cestucci's avuncular advice about shopgirls. Both men had entirely missed the point. Well, he thought, why waste energy in irritation. Hadn't Cestucci given him something to prop up what had been only a vague assumption? Yes, an herbalist somewhere in the case would answer a multitude of questions.

Chinatown was in semi-darkness when the hack pulled up to the mouth of a narrow alley. The only light came from the dingy street lamps along Pell, while Pell Alley itself was sty-

gian in its murkiness.

"Say, mister," the driver said as Phipps paid him, "this ain't no place for a social gent to be walkin' into. Opium pipes will rot your brain and destroy your Christian soul. Get back in, pilgrim, and let me drive you free of charge back uptown, where I can introduce you to a lady preacher who can burn the cravin' from your lungs with pure brimstone!"

"Thank you, I'll be all right," Phipps assured him with a smile. Perhaps, he mused to himself, the Good Folk *were* having some effect on the city. He felt quite sure that, before the advent of the May Crusade, the average city hackie would be more apt to lead a stranger to a lady who, evangelical though she may have been in her profession, had nothing to do with brimstone or the expulsion of sensual desire.

Once up the Alley, Phipps found it was not as black as it had appeared from the main street. There was just enough light cast from the windows that punctured the brick tenement walls for him to make out a lone doorway with a small sign bearing Oriental calligraphy. Although the characters were meaningless to Phipps, he was sure the single door was that of Kee Wong's shop, and was fully prepared to use the skeleton key Finley had given

him years ago. To his surprise, however, the door opened to his touch. Once inside, he found himself wishing Finley had also given him a regulation bull's-eye lantern along with the key. The place was pitch black, and he was standing in a warmish atmosphere heavily scented with a mixture of aromas. He reached for the matches in his weskit pocket, but the perspiration-drenched nape of his neck suddenly contracted under a chill that went deep into his first cervical vertebra—the chill of cold steel.

"Be as stone, bucko," a voice said in the darkness, "or you'll see hell before you can blink."

But blink he did as a bright light bathed his face. He heard a startled voice—as startled as his own would have been had he not suddenly forgotten how to speak. "Dr. Phipps! Sweet Mother! What are you doing here?"

The bright light left Phipps's face and shone on the speaker's.

"Sergeant Binabee! You gave me quite a start!"

"Not any more than you gave me when I heard that front door push open. Now, would you mind telling me how you came to be here, of all places?"

"Before I tell you, sergeant, perhaps you would enlighten me on the same question."

"Well, you remember that I told you my years on the Broad-

way Squad made for a lot of favors owing from the hackies about town. So I started calling in the debts. If this Madame deRies had a lover someplace, I reckoned that she'd need some secret, out of the way place. It certainly couldn't be a hotel, or even a home in a respectable neighborhood. And it had to be in town or close by, if she was only gone overnight. So I put out the message that I was looking for information on any well-dressed ladies being taken at night to back street addresses."

While he spoke, Binabee swept the room with his lantern ray, and finally located a kerosene lamp on a long table. Phipps took his matches out, and within seconds Binabee was delivering the finale of his report in the aura of a gloomy yellow lampglow.

"I can tell you, sir, there is no other group of people who get around more, nor hear more and remember more, than hackies. The general public treats them like they were invisible, yet they are flesh and blood nosy bodies like the rest of us."

"A most interesting observation, sergeant, and obviously a fruitful one, since you are here."

"If I am, I've got to admit I don't know why. I was surprised at the amount of traffic some of our back streets get

from well-dressed ladies. I had at least twelve reports of different ladies being delivered to a house on Baxter Street. As far as this place goes, the several reports I got from the hackies all sounded like the same woman was coming from the same general area uptown. Baxter Street seemed more promising, but when I got there, I found it boarded up and padlocked by the assessor's office for back taxes, with a tax agent on duty to make sure the debtor didn't remove any of his things.

"It's a short walk from Baxter Street to Pell, so I came along here on the dumbest assumption you'll ever hear, doctor. It was because you were so interested in the elm leaves on the doll. You left your textbook open, and I noticed there a tree called the Chinese elm."

Phipps had been walking around the room, observing the cluttered work tables and the shelves laden with oddly shaped jars and clay containers. "What about the Chinese elm?"

"Don't know, but I was grasping at straws. I figured, *Chinese elm leaf, Chinese house* that receives an uptown lady at night. Now, if it's two and two, I still can't explain why it makes four, but it must if you're here, too."

Phipps smiled inwardly at the situation. Here were an untutored policeman and himself, a purportedly well-trained an-

alytical thinker, each dealing in faulty excogitations and each arriving at the same place at the same time. In fact, it was Binabee's "shoe leather" approach that had actually produced the real facts needed to further the case's solution.

"Forgive me, sergeant," he said as he poked around in various jars with his finger, occasionally putting a touch of the contents to tongue tip, "but we both seem to be right for the wrong reason. Back at my rooms, I said that the killer was either botanically ignorant, because the leaf on the doll is not from a white elm, or devilishly symbolic. I know now it was the latter.

"But, my dear sergeant, you were incorrect when you assumed that the leaf was from the Chinese elm. In fact, it was from *Ulmus ruba*, the slippery elm, the deadly buds of May. Still, your efforts with the hackmen were admirable. We will have to doublecheck some facts, but we are on a sure track now."

"Glad of it," Binabee assured him. "Slippery elm, you say? By the way, I wouldn't go tasting the stuff in those jars, doctor. Could be poison."

"Some of it is, in large enough doses. Yes, slippery elm, or rather the bark of that tree." He held up a cylindrical glass jar containing dark strips of

cork-like material. "*Ulmus fulva*, as the bark is called, is an abortifacient."

"Are you talking about something used in abortion?"

"Precisely. These jars represent the wares of the abortionist's trade." He walked along beside the shelf, tapping each container as he spoke. "Cantarides, lead plaster, quinine, extract of cotton wool. Those are the drug elements of this lurid business, and here are the instruments, when all else has failed." He lifted a cloth and displayed what appeared to Binabee's medically untrained eye as nothing more than a collection of oddly shaped metal items.

"So the Oriental was an abortionist. The monster!" Binabee was incensed. "Don't worry, doctor, we'll put the twisters on him, soon enough."

"No need. He is now the occupant of Brinze's overcrowded morgue. By the by, don't be chagrined at your misinterpreting the elm leaves. I went to the morgue because slippery elm suggested abortion, and I hoped that an autopsy would show that Madame deRies had had one recently. It's almost impossible to detect abortion if it is a success, but I was hoping against hope. Believe me, if you were grasping at straws, I was snatching at butterflies. Of course, both Brinze and Ser-

geant Cestucci erroneously assumed I meant that she was with child and was killed by her lover. That, of course, was absurd, but suffering their chiding was worth it because I learned of the murder of a Chinese herbalist. Herbalist and abortifacients. Not a very strong equation, but butterfly chasers have no choice but to rush about."

"I had just let myself in," Binabee said, "when I heard you coming up the alley. Damned lucky I didn't put a slug in you, doctor."

"Damned lucky I didn't go into shock. In fact, I did momentarily, you startled me so. However, if Finley would, as usual, give me poor grades in my detection process, he can only commend yours. You have established that a woman of quality visited here with some regularity, and with luck the drivers will be able to identify her as Madame deRies."

"My God, doctor, how many abortions could she have had?"

"She wasn't having an abortion, sergeant, she was, no doubt, performing them, with the Oriental in assistance. If we accept that premise, everything else makes sense. What better facade than the headmistress of a fashionable girls' school? Certainly an Oriental wouldn't have an entrée to that portion of polite society that is seeking what

are euphemistically called 'female remedies' for obstetrics. Can you see how the business was developed? She helps one young woman and then another until a flourishing trade is blossoming. High society keeps its own secrets well hidden. No wonder the elite of the city wanted her murder hushed up and her body out of the way."

"She must have been doing abortions at the school but using this place to store her illegal goods. I guess that's why Metacuew was tearing the mansion apart."

"I beg to differ, sergeant. Metacuew was ordered to search for something in particular, all right. Abortionists are not above blackmail, and I'll venture that Madame deRies wouldn't have overlooked the opportunity to bleed her wealthy clientele. She undoubtedly kept records, thus the search of her home. But I doubt she performed the abortions there—that would have been too risky. She needed another front while keeping this place secret. Again, your legwork has supplied an obvious location."

Binabee pushed his derby to the back of his head, giving him an uncharacteristically jaunty look. "Right before my eyes, and didn't see. The house on Baxter Street! A short walk away. Certainly! Different young ladies being delivered

there. That's why it was closed up for taxes and a guard on duty. I'll bet that place has been torn apart as well."

"I'm sure it has, but the headmistress was no fool. She would no more keep records in a house known to her customers than she would keep them at her mansion. They were kept here, and if the killer hasn't found them—for he has certainly been here—here they still are."

"Well, let's get to looking, then."

"No, sergeant, let us divide our energies. I will search this place while you see if the hack drivers can positively identify the woman who visited here as Madame deRies. After that we need to know who owned the house on Baxter Street. We must tie her to both places before our theory takes on weight."

"Even if it doesn't, we still have to find the killer."

"One brick at a time, sergeant. Will you leave me your lantern?"

"And my blackjack, too, just to be safe. You know, if this abortion business has been going on for a while, I'm amazed that neither Cestucci nor Big Boy Young was onto it. Baxter Street is in Five Points, and this place is in Cestucci's lick."

"Possibly it was too cleverly covert. But I would caution you not to mention our progress to any of the working stiffs. Nor,

of course, to anyone in the administration."

"Mum's the word. But I'll bet Captain Finley would sure love to know."

Phipps looked alarmed. "Heavens, sergeant, say nothing to Finley, absolutely nothing!"

As Binabee walked up Pell Alley, he couldn't help feeling that the Hawk was acting strangely about Finley. Maybe he wanted all the credit for himself. Or maybe, just maybe—no, he dismissed the thought. After all, Tess Finley was a righteous woman.

When Phipps returned to his rooms in Copley Mews, it was well after eight A.M. Although he was tired from his all-night search of Kee Wong's shop, he refreshed himself with copious cups of coffee, a shave, and a bath before dealing with the box.

Had he not once seen a Chinese puzzle box in a Paris magic show, he would have overlooked it in his examination of the cabinets, drawers, and closets in the Pell Alley shop. He had tapped walls and floorboards, peeped and poked into every cranny, and found nothing. Then he discovered the puzzle box under a rude cot. It was deceptively simple in appearance and, to the unknow-

ing observer, had only three drawers, which contained innocent household items: a few scarves, a cheap ring, some combs—things even the most ardent explorer would bypass. Now, seated at his desk with an after-coffee pipe, he studied the box with renewed intensity. No two of these things were constructed in the same way, and the joints were so finely mitred that even his magnifying lens could not detect the hairsbreadth of a telltale crack. He twisted and turned the object in every conceivable way with no success and, after an hour, gave up. Pleased as he would have been to solve the secret of the box, he went to the hearth instead and returned with the poker.

Five strokes reduced it to splinters. There, in the rubble, was a small, leather covered pocket ledger.

He took it up hastily. Its neatly-written pages recorded a series of abortion activities stretching back over a ten year period and including the names of very prominent people, not only from New York but from Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

If she had been killed to stop blackmail, he thought, there would have been hundreds of suspects, but he knew that was not the reason for her death. Not given the doll and the leaf.

He was examining those abortions done each year in May when Binabee arrived.

"We're right on the money, doctor," he said with elation. "Three hackies recognized her as the woman they took several times to Pell Alley. Got a newspaper photograph of her with one of her graduating classes and passed it around. Then I got over to the city clerk's office when it opened and went through the deeds. She owned the Baxter Street house, too. I guess two and two *are* making four. That's a real mess you have there. Have an accident?"

Phipps regarded the pile of smashed wood. "Reason giving way to impatience, I'm afraid." He explained about finding the puzzle box and showed Binabee the pocket ledger. "There must be over three hundred names in here."

"That's a lot of suspects."

"I'm more interested in the names on the pages that have been torn out. See? Over the years, a dozen or so entries have been removed."

"You mean to tell me that one of her blackmail victims killed her and the Chinaman to get that book and then only tore out a few pages? He could have destroyed the entire record and helped everyone. It doesn't make sense."

"So it would seem, but the killer didn't find this ledger. In

fact, I doubt if he even searched for it. The pages weren't removed by the killer, sergeant. They were torn out by deRies herself."

"But why?"

"Protecting herself, of course. Abortion is a dangerous game, and no matter how skilled deRies was, she still had fatalities. She wanted a record book clean of the names of women who died under her hands. She certainly wouldn't try black-mailing the family of the victim of a botched job. No, I feel sure that deRies was not murdered by someone trying to escape blackmail. Our killer had a stronger, more primal motivation—retribution!"

"Revenge, doctor? It's possible, but I'll say this: whoever did her in was a hypocrite. Hell, the killer was an accessory before the fact and knew that an abortion put a woman in jeopardy. Yet he or she let the pregnant woman go ahead anyway. Blaming deRies is a case of the pot calling the kettle black, don't you think?"

"Yes, if indeed the killer was an accessory before the fact. He or she would not then truly fit the role of an avenger, so let us assume it was an after-the-fact situation. Now, don't look so appalled, sergeant. Women have been known to keep secrets from their spouses and loved ones."

"Well, you used the word 'assume,' doctor, and it seems to me we are doing a powerful lot of assuming and damned little fact-finding. I can't help thinking that Captain Finley would question our methods."

"Really? How so? The good captain does like to build his conclusions one fact after another. But that is not the exclusive route to the truth. We have been cut off from the case, and yet, through inference and your stout legwork, we have discovered some very damning facts about the late Madame deRies."

"This after-the-fact discovery and retribution idea satisfies several aspects of the actual murder. The slashing of her body did not allow the victim a quick or pleasant death, yet it is symbolic of a shattered womb, especially in combination with the doll, or child symbol, and, of course, the elm leaf. Yes, sergeant, if we follow this line of thought, we take a giant step toward a solution. I believe Madame deRies was executed by someone who had lost a loved one under her hands."

"Even if you're right, how can you prove it? Your theory says deRies destroyed the pages with the names of those who died, and the book goes back over ten years. Are the pages in any way dated, by the way?"

"My hat's off to you, sergeant. Yes, they are, and of course, we

can determine the approximate dates of deaths from the pages preceding and following those removed."

"Well," Binabee sighed, "it's a start, but checking the death certificates for the last ten years is . . ."

"Not necessary, if May Day is as significant as I think it is. Here, you see, a page was torn out between October 26th and November 20th of last year. A fetus aborted between those dates was probably conceived in late summer, say, in late August or early September. Criminal abortions are usually performed during the second to fourth months, and if the woman wanted to keep her secret, she would certainly seek one as soon as possible."

Binabee looked confused.

"Don't you see, sergeant? If the fetus had not been aborted, the child would have been born in May, and our ritual-minded murderer fixed it as May 1st. DeRies was executed on the child's natal day. I must admit the killer has a strong attraction to the poetical, and from your sudden change of expression, I suspect you believe I have, too."

"Poetical? Well, maybe. 'Fancy' would be a better word for it, and if I can add a practical note, we still don't know who the pregnant woman was. I don't know that any death cer-

tificate issued between October 26th and November 20th will give the cause of death as abortion. Doctors sometimes lie to protect the family, you know, even if it covers up a crime."

"Too true, sergeant, but even when a doctor falsifies some record for what he thinks a just cause, he tries to come as close to the truth as possible. To satisfy some inner pang of conscience, perhaps. So now it's my turn to do some legwork. I will go over to Vital Statistics and check the records for that time period in the hope that some colleague has listed a near truth as cause of death. A generally innocent term like 'septicemia,' say."

"Suppose I go back to looking for Mrs. Finley's dishes. You don't think the barrel was a symbol, do you, doctor?"

Phipps smiled. "It is obvious, sergeant, that the letter Mrs. Finley was duped into delivering was the first step in connecting her to the case. The second step was having the body turn up at the Finley flat. Ergo, Mrs. Finley is suspect, and her husband, the best homicide detective in the city, is off the case. Once deRies was identified, a whole chain of events took place, and pressure was brought to bear on the department to hush up the case. The inept Lieutenant Metacuew was tearing the deRies mansion

apart, and probably the guarded house on Baxter Street, too, for this record book, although he almost certainly wouldn't have known its significance when he found it. In the meantime, even the working stiffs were avoiding the case. Our killer certainly knows the tribal mores of New York, since he was able to predict and foresee each move. Except one."

"Which was?"

"I reserve that for the moment. As for finding the dishes, we'll have to find the killer first. But if you have the time, you could check on the movements of a former member of the Thumpers who is now residing at the morgue. Please, sergeant," he cut off the obvious question, "I don't *know* what he has to do with all this, but he had reason to hate Captain Finley for killing Red Shagrue; he died the same day deRies did; and as Finley says, there are no coincidences. Let's meet back here this evening."

Phipps spent several hours at the Bureau of Vital Statistics meticulously scrutinizing death records. What he found was not the suspicious half-truth he was looking for. It was, instead, a name, a familiar name that made everything suddenly fall into place. Of course, he still lacked a single shred of proof,

and the charge could be denied, but he doubted that it would be once a dramatic tactic was employed.

When he got home, he wrote a letter, walked to Fairsnow's Delivery Service on 14th Street, and arranged for the letter's delivery by hand. The hand delivery was his own ironic touch: that was what had set the case in motion; that was what should end it.

He returned to his rooms and stretched out for a much needed rest. Mrs. Downs awakened him, as she had been ordered to do, when the return letter arrived. It was close on six as he unsealed the envelope and read its contents. Then he went to the house on West 24th Street.

The Finley front door was opened to him by an energetic woman in her late twenties. In true suffragette style she shook Phipps's hand manfully and proclaimed herself to be Miss Amalee Runsecker, Tess Finley's sister. As she ushered him into the front parlor, he was greeted by the sight of a grinning Finley, his completely recovered wife, and a barrel of dishes.

"Hey, doctor," said the captain with uncontrollable gusto, "come on in and take a look. Tess's dishes are back and so is she. Damndest thing! Delivered just half an hour ago. Cartman says he was told to pick the bar-

rel up at a warehouse on Dock Street, so that's a lead in the murder."

"It won't be necessary. The case is solved. I'll explain in a minute, but first, I would like a few moments alone with your wife. Strictly medical. We don't want a relapse."

And when they were alone in the back parlor, Tess Finley told him, "There won't be a relapse, doctor. I'm fine now."

"Yes, I can see that. Which arrived first, the dishes or your sister?"

"What a queer question."

"Oh, it's just clinical curiosity. I suspect that once your sister arrived, and reassured you that she had nothing to do with the woman's death, your attack of mock hysteria was over."

Tess bowed her head.

"I was afraid I wasn't really fooling you. How much do you know?"

"Enough to understand your dilemma. Your sister once had an abortion by a woman who lived in a Baxter Street house, who later demanded money for silence."

"Yes, I went with her. I didn't know her as Madame deRies the schoolmistress, but when I opened the barrel, I recognized her as the abortionist from Baxter Street. I thought. . . oh, I thought somehow that Amalee was involved. Until I could talk to her, the only recourse I had

was to play the madwoman . . . mad isn't the proper medical word, but it will do me."

"*Hysteria* is the technical term. I've had some personal experience with it myself lately, having had a pistol poked at my neck last night.

"It was my own symptom of momentary hysteria that led me to suspect yours was not genuine. My reaction was instant immobility, a loss of speech, *and* no logical speech pattern. Yours, on the other hand, was a calm recitation about finding your dishes."

"It was the first thing to cross my mind."

"Yet it was that demand that confused me all the more. It was too logical to be a madwoman's ranting, and further, if your inner mind was trying to black out the murder, why keep demanding that the dishes be found? That was, in effect, asking for the solution of the murder—no dishes, no killer."

"The same thing occurred to me later," Tess said, "but to change my actions would have made my pretense suspect. I had to wait for Amalee to come, and John didn't wire her until this morning."

"As it turned out, your 'illness' was the means of extracting a confession. You see, the killer knew you as a strong-willed woman and never dreamed that finding the body

would affect you so. He was also ignorant of your previous connection with deRies."

"The killer *knows* me?"

"I'm afraid so. It was obvious from the first that he knew at least the annual movements of your household and your sister's connection with the Weck-quasgecks. The objective in planting the body here, after duping you with that bogus letter, was to get your husband off the case. Since the letter you delivered hasn't been found, by the way, I can only assume that, in it, the killer charged deRies with her activities and she destroyed it. But if you had actually met her when you delivered it, things might have turned out differently."

"You said my illness brought about a confession. How so?"

"Turnabout is fair play, and since a false letter started the wheels of this affair in motion, I determined that one written by me should put it to rest. I had no proof against the murderer except a certificate for his wife's death last October. The cause of death was listed as 'stoppage of the heart's action,' which is not a medical untruth; that is, in fact, the ultimate cause of any death. Ordinarily, the signing physician should have been challenged and an exhumation order sought, but given the political overtones of the case, I didn't expect much

from that. I had no choice, therefore, but to resort to a bit of chicanery. I told him, in quite convincing psychological terms, that unless the dishes were returned you were in sure danger of becoming incurably insane. His conscience and his desire to do you no harm forced his hand."

"And all because of that foul woman's greed for blackmail . . ."

"No, she would not dare blackmail the family of someone she had killed. Her murderer 'delivered unto her the wrath of God'—that's a direct quote from his return letter, confession, actually, which I received a short while ago."

"You see, he and his wife had gone childless for a number of years and had come to believe that one of them was sterile or barren. Then, unknown to him, the wife did indeed find herself pregnant. She was thirty-eight and she panicked over old wives' tales. There must be an entire underground of information known only to the women of this city, since I gather she had no trouble finding that Baxter Street address for the abortion she thought she had to have."

"After the botched job, as she lay dying of a raging fever, probably a septicemia, she confessed to her husband and was forgiven. A family doctor was induced to protect her good name with a generalized cause of

death. The grief-stricken husband then planned deRies's execution, and he planned that it would fall on the day he calculated his once-longed-for child would have been born."

Tears were welling in Tess Finley's eyes. "I know he is a murderer, but how terribly sad for him. May Day; new birth. He must have been insane with grief."

"His obsession with symbolic details does show mental instability. He went about it like a Druid high priest planning a human sacrifice."

"I will probably burn in hell's fire for letting Amalee do such a horrible thing, but she was headstrong . . ." Tess shook her own head in despair. "These modern women are moving too fast, doctor. I suppose it will all come out now."

"As to who had abortions, no. I destroyed that record in my fireplace. A presumptuous act, some might say, but I believe it justifiable, since nothing would be gained by publicity."

"Thank you," Tess said, and after a brief silence, "the dishes. How did he get them?"

"Simple enough. According to the movers, you left Bond Street before the charette was loaded, in order to get here for the transfer of the keys. It was child's play to switch barrels on an already crowded sidewalk on moving day. The confession

states that a certain burly plug-ugly did the deed and then paid for it with his life."

"You aren't going to tell me who the killer is?"

"Perhaps in due time, ma'am, but first, I must consult the working stiff's."

Later that evening in the back room of the Gold Shield, Phipps stood under Jacob Hay's portrait and reported to the assembled police officers all his findings except for the true reason behind Tess Finley's hysteria. He finished the reading of the confession letter with its signature: "Written by Thomas Medfield, Lieutenant, New York Police Department."

The group sat in uneasy silence, each avoiding the others' eyes. It was Binabee who finally spoke. "And you found him dead when you went to his house with Brinze, doctor?"

"Arsenic, I'm afraid."

Corkin spoke up. "I should have been more of a pal when he lost his wife. I know how tough it can be, having been through it myself. Damn it, he must have been driven insane."

"Which brings us to an ethical decision," Phipps went on. "Shall we let the entire matter fade away, let the deRies death go unsolved, and put Medfield's death down to despondence over his wife?"

"Or shall we serve justice?"

"Now, that's putting it a little harshly, doctor," Corkin groaned, and was supported by various grumbles around the room. "Hell, Tom put deRies out of a very dangerous business. And he *was* insane, I feel it in my heart."

"Then, by all means, take a vote."

Much later that evening, Phipps and Binabee were strolling up Broadway, making part of the ebb and flow of that madding thoroughfare. At various corners, there were evangelical preachers proclaiming their various causes, underscored by everything from brass bands, banjos, and tambourines to simple mouth organs and cadenced hand clapping. It was like the pulsing of an engine of righteous desire.

"I guess I can't blame the stiffs for voting for a coverup," Binabee said with unmasked dejection, "but we put in a fair amount of time on this thing to no end. And now, to make matters worse, we are all compounding a felony!"

"Calm yourself, sergeant. Strictly speaking, you possibly might be dealing with misprision of felony."

"All right, be technical. We still broke the law."

"How so? Misprision states that one must have knowledge

of a felony without assent. What factual knowledge, proof, do you or does anyone else have that a felony was committed?"

"The abortion record book, for one, and Medfield's confession."

"But you have only my word for it that those documents contained what I said they did. No one but myself ever read them. You see, I could have been making the whole thing up. To go a step further, misprision requires that a private person obstruct a prosecution by his silence. Prosecute whom? Everyone is dead. No, sergeant, your legal honor is unscathed. If anyone is guilty of anything, it is I, for making a decision regarding ethics. In fact, this whole affair is riddled with such decisions."

"What about God's authority? Medfield's wife went against it, having an abortion in the first place."

"Then leave her to heaven. Look about you, sergeant. What do you hear? Is it so? *Vox populi, vox Dei*. It suggests that the deity, like a politician, hears only the din of crowds and is deaf to a lone voice in the wilderness. But no theology tonight, my friend, we have earned a grand dinner, and you are my guest. I might suggest that we'd best get to it before someone forms a group against public dining."

UNSOLVED

by Nolen Harsh

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

Use the following clues to determine who killed Joe Mason, how, what day, what time of day, and where.

1. If he was killed on Tuesday, it was for profit or jealousy.
2. If he was killed on Saturday, the motive was jealousy.
3. If Sue killed him, it was for profit.
4. If Bob killed him, it was with poison.
5. If he was killed in his office, it was in the afternoon.
6. If Ed killed him, it was for revenge, but not with poison.
7. If he was killed on Friday, the motive was revenge.
8. If he was shot, it was in his study.
9. If he was killed in the afternoon, it was on Tuesday or Friday.
10. If he was poisoned, it was in his office.
11. Ann would poison him, but not shoot or stab him.
12. If he was killed at night, it was on Saturday or Tuesday.
13. If he was stabbed, it was in his study or on a picnic.
14. If he was killed on Friday, it was in the afternoon or morning.
15. If he was killed in his study, it was in the morning or at night.
16. If he was killed for jealousy, it was by Bob or Ann.
17. If he was killed on a picnic, it was at night.
18. Ann did not kill him on Tuesday; she was out of town.
19. If he was killed on Friday, it was not in his study.
20. Sue did not kill him at night or in his office.

See page 138 for the solution to the January puzzle.

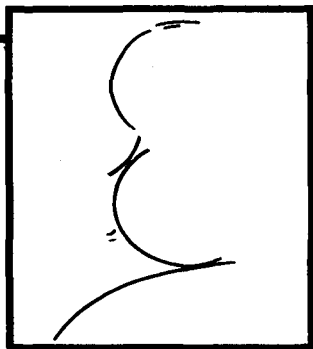


Roy Scheider and Meryl Streep in *Still of the Night*.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



A top cast, smooth direction, fashionably elegant settings, and an intriguing premise make **Still of the Night** the best mystery thriller to have come along in quite a while. One of psychiatrist Roy Scheider's patients appears to have been knifed to death by his girlfriend. Scheider, who has heard all about the girlfriend from his patient, has fallen in love with her without ever having seen her. When they do meet after the killing, he falls even harder and decides to shield her from the police, a decision that puts him in danger of being the next victim.

But was the girl the killer? The solution comes from a series of psychological clues, hav-

ing to do with Scheider's unconscious reasons for falling in love, with the impenetrable character of the girl, and with the dream symbolism in a nightmare the patient had told Scheider about before he was killed. The psychiatrist's mom, played by Jessica Tandy, is also a psychiatrist, and she helps out with the analysis during her all too brief appearances in the movie. Just like any ordinary mother, though, she is kept partly in the dark, never learning that her son has fallen in love. (One gets the impression that Jessica Tandy would have gotten right to the bottom of things if only she had been given a bit more screen time and a bit more information.)

Other clues to the killer's identity have to do with the objects of art stored at the Sotheby Parke Bernet-like auction house that employs the patient and his girlfriend. The psychiatrists and the police detective on the case work their way to the murderer by two routes, the one psychological and the other practical. But they both get there at about the same time.

Still of the Night reunites the director of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Robert Benton, with its star, Meryl Streep. Benton wrote the new movie with Streep in mind, and one can see why. Since *The French Lieutenant's Woman* she has stood out as Hollywood's premiere actress for the role of the mysterious woman. This time her character harks back not to the nineteenth century but to the impenetrable blondes of Alfred Hitchcock. Like the rest of *Still of the Night*, her scenes are shot entirely at night and in subdued interiors. The lovely, subtle colors somehow give the feeling of a black and white movie out of the 1940's, the great period of detective thrillers.

The film editor for *Still of the Night* also worked on *Dressed to Kill*, Brian de Palma's mannered imitation of Hitchcock. And so it is not surprising when one is reminded of the master's movies in general by the mys-

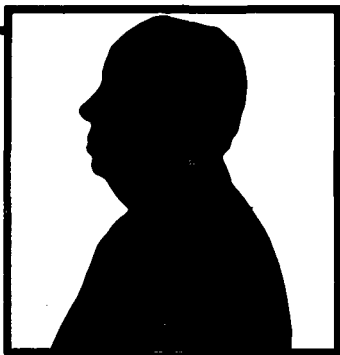
terious blonde heroine, and of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest* in particular, by the auction house setting. The final scene in which Meryl Streep is poised over an angry, rocky ocean far below recalls the ending of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). The psychiatrist's falling in love with an absent woman recalls, of course, the obsession of Dana Andrews with Gene Tierney in *Laura* (1944), a non-Hitchcock movie.

Unlike its predecessors, *Still of the Night* is not above playing a trick or two on the audience to keep it on the wrong scent. And to keep up the fright level, it resorts too often to sudden shrieks—notably by an unnecessary Hitchcockian white bird. (These are the techniques of the *chiller*, as opposed to the more subtle ways of a top notch thriller.) Finally, New Yorkers will be amazed at the scene shot in nighttime Central Park. Here casual strollers are shown entering and leaving a place well known to have been off limits after dusk for over twenty years.

Whatever its imperfections, however, *Still of the Night* stands out for its literate good taste. Except for a gory moment at the beginning, it eschews the violence, blood, explicit sex, and vulgar language that seem to have become the norm for genre movies.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



Although it was well reported by the press, somehow the significance of the event was not fully underscored. Recently, in one of those gleaming new fully mechanized Japanese factories, which employ only a handful of human supervisory personnel, a maintenance worker noticed something wrong on the assembly line. Carelessly, he stepped inside a restricted zone to repair the machine—and was hacked to death by an automaton moving up behind him. It was the first recorded case of **murder by robot**.

According to Isaac Asimov's famed Laws of Robotics, it could not have happened. "A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm." In this manless factory, however, the robots were clearly trained not to serve humanity but to churn out automotive gears. And on the screen, robots have been menacing man ever since the Czech writer Karel Capek—for his play, *R.U.R.*—adapted the word "robot" from words in his language meaning drudgery and servitude.

In the early days of the silent film, there were many automaton servants, "motor" valets, electric men, and lifesized dancing dolls of sinister allure drawn from the tales of Hoffman and the Délibes ballet *Coppélia*. When Harry Houdini decided to become a film star in the serial *The Master Mystery*, the villain was a robot with whom

he grappled in hand-to-hand combat. In the classic *Metropolis* the villain creates a beautiful robot woman to incite the workers to destroy their own city. Very few early movie robots heeded Asimov's law.

In the 1930's, all kinds of mad scientists and munitions kings hammered together armies of robots for world conquest. Screen villains like Bela Lugosi in *The Phantom Creeps* were rarely seen without their personal automatons, huge lumbering tin beings with faces cast in permanent scowls, causing continuing havoc at their masters' bidding but often turning against them at the end.

It was not until the 1950's that the screen image of the robot became more complex, less evil. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the towering Gort and a human companion land in a flying saucer in Washington, D.C., to warn us to cease our warlike ways. Clearly superior to everyone else in the film, Gort remains unruffled by the U.S. Army's attempts to destroy him. In *Forbidden Planet*, set in a far future, the beloved Robby the Robot's devotion and wisdom are saintlike. Clearly an Asimovian child, he would rather blow out all his circuits than fire a ray gun at any human being. Yet the noble robots of this period soon made way for slyer models. In the vastly underrated *Gog*, two experimental robots assisting scientists in a secret laboratory in New Mexico go on an inexplicable and deadly rampage—the Russians have learned to deprogram them by remote control. Hal 9000, the sweet-voiced, treacherous robot brain in *2001*, reasons that he must eliminate the human crew he serves because of their unpredictability.

Robot villainy can be both contemporary and domestic. In the amusement park *Westworld*, all the automatons go murderously berserk. Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* shows us a Connecticut community where the women have all been murdered and replaced by pliant mechanical doubles.

But the traditional robots of the screen have had no more than murder on their minds as they defy police cordons and smash through bank vaults. No doubt this complex new era of cinematic melodrama rushing upon us will give the sleeker new robots of today much more to do.

FICTION

The Case of the



Disappearing by Andre Gun Nelson

Illustration by Arthur George

On impulse, I swung off Highway 101 and drove into Pacific Point. I was on my way to Santa Barbara for my annual checkup at Sansum Clinic. As I had plenty of time, however, I decided to stop en route, to see Joe Bolten. He and I had worked the Pacific Point city patrol together when I was a rookie cop. Joe had stayed with the department and made chief of police, while I had quit the force, gotten a private investigator's license, and now worked out of an office on Third and Spring Streets in Los Angeles. As I pulled up in front of the station, I noted that the building hadn't changed since I had worked there. It still seemed to squat low on the ground, like the football guards I had had to root out of the way when I played on the offensive line for the Rams, and its right-angled entrance made me think of an old castle with its shoulders hunched up to repel attackers.

Inside, it looked a bit friendlier. I waved at Nancy, the receptionist, who remembered me, and walked back to Joe's office. When I opened the door, Joe was there, a big, jut-nosed man in his forties, filled with nervous energy. He glanced up at me, then bent his head over a report on his desk and stayed that way for a measurable period of time. I noisily pulled a chair over to his desk and sat down. Joe looked up in irritation and ran his fingers through his short hair, making it stand up like a forest of spikes.

"A hell of a time you picked for a social visit."

I knew the mood. "What's wrong, a sticky case?"

He glowered at me, glad of someone he knew well enough to vent his pent-up frustration on. "It really shouldn't be; looks open and shut, but there are a few threads that I can't seem to wrap up."

"Tell me about it," I suggested, knowing he would anyway.

"All the evidence points to murder in the course of a robbery. John Miller, a sixty-year-old man, lived alone in a small house down on the Avenue, on the outskirts of the city. Two days ago he was found shot to death on a deserted section of the beach. His clothing was torn, and all his pockets were turned inside out. His face and arms were bruised and scratched, as though he had resisted his attacker. His wallet was found near by, empty, of course, and some personal papers were strewn around the body. An odd thing to me in this case was the presence of a thin coat of grease on the victim's right hand."

"Any suspects? Did you find a murder weapon?"

Joe answered irritably. "Like I said, the man lived alone and had no known enemies. Of course, we put out an all points bulletin,

you know the procedures. All we got out of that was a report from an eight-year-old boy who said he was standing on a bluff overlooking that section of the beach on the morning when the death occurred. He said he saw a man holding a weather balloon with one hand. Then the man suddenly let go of the balloon and fell down and went to sleep on the beach. According to the kid, the balloon caught on a pine for a moment, tore loose as the wind pulled at it, then drifted out to sea." Joe grimaced. "The poor kid is retarded, and I guess he was looking for some attention. We haven't found the weapon or the slug. It must have been a .45. The bullet was a dum-dum. The point had been filed off so it was flat, and it made a gaping exit hole. First time I've known of a hoodlum using that type of bullet."

I mulled that over for a moment, then commented, "Whoever pulled that trigger wanted to be sure the person died. You said he lived alone. Didn't he have any family?"

Joe swung the report around so I could read it. "He had been married. His wife divorced him shortly after he left the army. He had a daughter about twenty years old. She is going to school in France, and, according to our investigation, he had been meeting her expenses. However, even if he had not been killed, he could not have continued doing that much longer. The slowdown in the economy resulted in the loss of his job last month, and over the past two years, his bank account had dropped from around nine thousand dollars to less than two hundred."

I scaled the report back to him across the desk. "Given the evidence your people have dug up, I'd have to agree that murder in the course of a robbery would be the only finding justified. Let's go to lunch, I'll buy."

Joe grunted, "No, think I'll stay here. I want to make a final decision on this case today, and wrap it up." He looked up at me and said heavily, "I can't say you've shed any new light on it!"

For years my favorite seafood place in Pacific Point has been one on the Pierpont pier, where the breeze is always cool and the view delightful. Tony Antonielle, the owner, greeted me like a long-lost son, and as I sat at the counter eating, I kidded him about all the money he must be making. Tony started the restaurant about fifteen years ago, and it grew with the city. In addition, his three sons had been operating fishing boats and found a ready market for their catch at the various seafood cafes along the coast from Santa Barbara to Pacific Point. When I mentioned that, Tony's

face lost its smile, and he told me that, in the past two months, the catches had been very poor, so poor that one of the fishing boats had to be sold to cut down on expenses. "As a matter of fact," he said, "in the past two days all that one of the boats brought back was a weather balloon found tangled on the reefs at Anacapa Island." He added that the balloon didn't even have any instruments on it, which they could have returned to the weather station for a reward.

Before Tony left me to wait on another customer, he said that the balloon was stretched out on the pier at the back of the restaurant and, if I wished, I could go out and look at it. Having never seen one at close range, I walked around to the back where Steve, one of the sons, was working on his nets. He described to me how they had found it and, pointing to a tear in the balloon's fabric, commented, "Guess it must have snagged something along the beach and been ripped a little, or else it would have drifted out toward Hawaii, and no one would have found it or the gun."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Gun? Your father didn't mention any gun."

"Yes, there was an empty .45 pistol tied to the shroudlines. The gun is in my truck. Come on over, and I'll show it to you." He started off toward the truck; halfway there, he broke into a run, cursing at what he had seen. When I caught up with him, I found him rummaging in the glove compartment. The window in the door on the passenger's side was broken. He told me, "It's gone; the gun is gone. I've parked this truck here for years, and it's never been bothered. Now, when I had something of value in it, somebody does this."

On the floor of the truck was a greasy paper. I picked it up. "Where did the grease come from?"

"The butt of the gun was smeared with grease when we untied it from the shroudlines. I wrapped the gun in that paper so it wouldn't get grease on the cabin table where we put it."

I folded the paper up and casually stuck it in my pocket as I said goodbye to Steve and left the pier. Heading back to the police station where my car was parked, I sensed a shadow passing over my head. A weather balloon from the navy installation near by was drifting above me. From beneath it, a metal object swung rhythmically. I halted and, disregarding the pedestrians who caroomed against me, watched the balloon as it reached out for the ocean. Then I walked quickly to the station and went directly to

the lab in the basement. Presuming on my past friendship with the chemist there, I asked him to analyze the grease on the paper I had taken from Steve's truck. I waited with growing impatience until he finished with the analysis and came back to me with the results. "It's a fairly common type of grease, used around here by hunters and woodsmen. In fact, it's the same type of grease I found on a sample the chief had me analyze yesterday. The sample came from the fellow who was murdered. I believe his name was Miller, something like that. . . ." He was still talking even after I had put a ten dollar bill in his hand to pay for the chemical analysis and hurried from the room.

Entering Joe's office for the second time that day, I bumped against an accountant type carrying a briefcase who was on his way out. I was just in time to hear him say something about notifying his office to make payment.

I opened my mouth, but Joe cut in. "That was an insurance representative. About four months ago, Miller took out a two hundred and fifty thousand dollar policy, naming his daughter as beneficiary. The company has been running its own investigation on the case to determine if there was any reason why the policy should not be paid. They couldn't find any such reason, and they just came in to touch bases with me to see what my final decision was. Ordinarily, I'd have hesitated a bit longer on giving a final decision on this one. I've felt uncomfortable with it. I don't know why."

He looked down for a moment at Miller's file on his desk, then tossed it into his out basket. As he did so he looked at me with a rare smile on his craggy face. "I never told you this before because I didn't want you to get a swelled head, but I've always considered you an outstanding cop. Seemed like you had the intuition to pick up things in a case that ordinary police work might disregard. You read the file in Miller's case and said that, in your opinion, it was murder, so that's the way I'm signing it off. I've never known you to be wrong yet." Then he said briskly, "What were you in such an all-fired hurry to see me about?"

I fumbled with my thoughts for a moment, then replied, "Just wanted to say goodbye, Joe. I'm running a bit late." As I started out, I added, "I asked your chemist to do an analysis on some material I had. It was nothing important. I paid him for his time; hope you don't mind."

I shoehorned my car out of the parking slot and picked my way

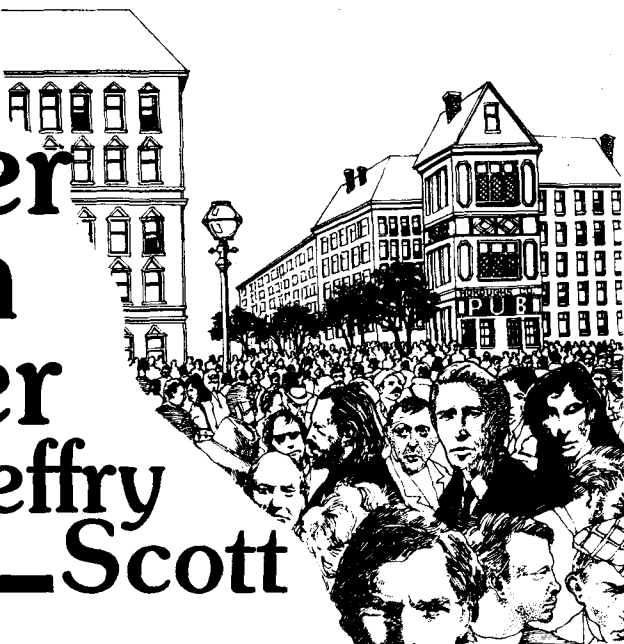
through traffic toward the on-ramp to 101 North. As I settled back for the drive, I reflected that Joe was a good police chief, honest and conscientious; he wanted to do what was right and what was legal. At times, the two goals were not the same, and I knew he agonized over some of the decisions he had to make, so why should I add to his problems? After all, how could I prove that Miller had committed suicide? That he had deliberately set the stage for his apparent death at the hands of another by tearing his own clothing, scratching his face and arms to indicate a struggle, strewing his empty wallet and personal papers around him, and then shooting himself in the head with a gun that disappeared. Yes, disappeared. The little boy had accurately reported what he had seen. Miller had tied the gun to the shroudlines of the balloon. Since both his hand and the gun butt were coated with grease, when he pulled the trigger, the weapon slipped out of his suddenly relaxed grip. Miller's body slumped to the sandy beach, while the balloon surged up, and the wind swept it out over the Pacific. It had snagged momentarily on one of the scraggly pines on the beach. Otherwise it never would have been found, and I would never have known the truth of what had happened that morning.

I wedged myself more firmly against the seat. My back was beginning to ache again. Miller had become a poor man without hope, his daughter a student in Europe, and he no longer had any money with which to help her. It appeared, however, that he was also a man of imagination and courage. I didn't feel much like presuming to make that gesture worthless. After all, he had loved his daughter. . . to death.

I looked at my watch. I'd have to hurry, or I'd be late for my appointment.

FICTION

Under Plain Cover by Jeffry —— Scott



The hobo and the bag lady had keenly inquiring minds.

As they prowled in front of the packed onlookers waiting for VIP's to pass in profile—appropriately, as they so often appear that way on coins and stamps—the derelicts were full of questions.

"Anybody got the price of a cuppa tea?" the hobo kept demanding. Rangy and mangy and astonishingly dirty, he boasted blackly missing teeth that were almost as distressing to the eye as those green suede

ones that survived.

"All right, don't everybody answer at once. Now, your last chance, you lot. Who's going to be a sport and lend me a quid?"

The bag lady kept to a tighter scenario. She hopped sideways down the line, one person at a time. Each time her cracked rubber boots smacked down on the pavement, she would shriek, "What sort of people *are* you, anyway?" And then hop on, riding her invisible pogo stick, without waiting for a reply.

Sometimes, evidently with malice aforethought, she made

Illustration by Ken Boroughs

the most dreadful noise at them, too.

The eighty or so spectators were trapped between a crowd barrier, a department store closed for the public holiday, and a road down which cavalymen were trotting, followed by marching soldiers and a band.

In all the noise and jollity, that section of sidewalk was a bubble of embarrassed silence. The British are said to take their pleasures sadly. Lack of pleasure, outright social agony in public, makes them sadder still. And very, very close-mouthed.

Except that the bag lady's dreadful noise had broken somebody's spirit. Every time it resounded, a female voice neighed in counterpoint, "Edward, I'm going to be ill, I just know it." At which a sort of mutual shudder of understanding would ripple through the victims.

As always when policemen are needed, they weren't there. Oh, they were around by the dozen, vicinity-wise, but not *there* there.

And the hobo and the bag lady were cunning and sly. Whenever any policemen did show signs of approaching, or sped past in cars or on white motorcycles, the vile pair stepped back up on the sidewalk—tightly packed though it

was, the thicket parted with pitiful eagerness—and stood still until the danger passed.

"What sort of people *are* you?" "Anybody lend me a quid?" And the sun beat down.

Mike Jordan pulled his floppy leather hat down over his shoulder-length hair, cursing mildly when a length of rawhide snapped and brim, parting company with crown, collapsed over his eyes. He was wearing a vest decorated with mirror scraps set into embroidery, purple pants, and patchwork boots. Restrained, understated gear, he told himself.

The boots, which were too small, inflicted a pain almost as vivid as their colors. He stared around morosely.

The onlookers were a motley mix. The tall, distinguished man in the pinstriped suit, for instance, was out of key. City gent, Mike Jordan guessed, who'd meant to work at his office, holiday or no. And marooned now, radiating suave disdain and a wistful hunger to be elsewhere.

Yes, thought Jordan, some were stalled, and many more, not very interested in visiting politicians, were willing to stick around and help with the stalling. The trouble was that, be-

tween gaps in the marchers and riders, people kept crossing the sidestreet, adding to the thrombosis caused by the crowd barrier. Seen from above, the press outside the store must be looking like a fat comma.

In little more than an hour, royalty, three democratic heads of state, and a brace of outright dictators would roll by, along with more diplomats, junior ministers, protocol experts, toadies, and talksmiths than you could shake a stick at.

Or shoot dead, or blow up, Jordan mused, his expression bleak.

But the girl in front of him wasn't about to attack anyone, though she might give a man heart failure.

She'd been trapped, Jordan decided, and he was glad of that. Silky auburn hair, almost as long as his own, released a musky scent, and her body, lithely ripe, exuded commercial possibilities. A quarter hour earlier, he had seen her emerging from the Megalon Hotel, diagonally across the road, earning a glower from the uniformed flunkey guarding the revolving door. (The Megalon wasn't prudish—not with its cheapest rooms costing eighty-five pounds a night without breakfast, and more vacancies than guests—but hookers were supposed to slink out the back.)

Fuming visibly, she was chewing gum with regular, bad-tempered snaps. He worked alongside, leering at her. "You could die of old age, stuck in this rabble," he remarked.

She looked at him for as long as it took for two mashes and a pop. He was aware of being evaluated financially, socially, and sexually, to the penny. "Go right ahead, don't wait for me, darlin'," she cooed. And then her level, empty gaze announced that he'd been forgotten.

One row behind and two yards to the right, nearer the front of the store, the mechanic was worrying under his breath. He'd given up waving to attract police attention. Small boys in the crowd on the far sidewalk had taken to greeting his efforts with returned salutes and mocking cheers.

Greying, twitchy, the mechanic had also given up telling everybody that the freezer was out in the Megalon's room-service kitchen, and that he had to get across there. They were bored with him. It was no good whining that he had to get anywhere at all; just like the rest of them, he couldn't.

Yet people *were* getting places, here and there, he observed. In every crowd, one or two can edge, sidle, and generally go where they will. Near a clutch

of soberly suited, rather pale men outside the department store's locked plate glass doors—the mechanic pegged them as managerial staff who would go back inside after the parade, for stocktaking or to make final plans to oust the company chairman—there was movement.

One self-absorbed little fellow with apple cheeks, sunglasses, and white hair tufting in devil's horns at the temples was not only getting through and past the throng but was making modest progress towards that damned barrier.

Makes it look easy as a fish swimming.

Pondering his simile, the mechanic found it silly and wondered what had provoked it. The chap wasn't a bit fishlike; a hamster, now, or a carnival gnome come to life, but not a—"Fish," the mechanic exclaimed. "Fishy Hook!"

The little horned man heard him and started violently. The mechanic ploughed towards him, ruthless with his elbows and toes. "Fishy, stay there, you old devil!" But the old devil knew a trick worth two of that and showed the liveliest determination to stay any place but there.

The bag lady stopped hopping, the hobo fell silent, the hooker spun round and strained

for a better view. *Fight*, thought Mike Jordan, prickling with alarm and suspicion. Real, or faked as a diversion? Either way, it had to be stopped. Plunging into the scrum, he was dimly aware of the hooker at his back, with the bag lady in hot pursuit.

By now, the small, tufted man had lost both his shades and his nerve. He was trying to escape up a store window displaying garden furniture. Ambition apart, he was a dismal failure at being a human fly, and the mechanic had a death grip on the slack of his jacket.

Jordan swept off the absurd hat, the long-haired wig coming away with it. Immediately he felt deliciously cool. "Pack it in, you lot!" And less loudly though with even more force, "I'm a police officer."

Before the third word was uttered, he experienced a certain mental vertigo: his statement had been echoed and slurred. It was like that time in Malaya when he'd contracted malaria and his skull had turned into a belfry.

But no, it wasn't an echo. Just that the mechanic was saying exactly the same thing, at the top of his voice, in harmony with the hobo and (her contribution a plangent East London contralto) the red-haired hooker.

The bag lady jogged his elbow. "I say, God, *this is* embarrassing. Actually, I'm a police officer, too."

The atmosphere in one corner of Gamrods Universal Store was like a village hall on amateur night, when the actors come out to mingle with the crowd. It wasn't really funny, though. Inspector Mike Jordan had caught more than a whiff of trouble in the extraordinary response to pickpocket Albert "Fishy" Hook's farcical downfall.

The bag lady had seen something among Fishy's haul as the mechanic examined it, and minutes later, senior Special Branch officers—who had been among that dark-suited delegation outside the main doors—had got the department store opened.

About the same time, reserve squads of uniformed policemen and a small, decisive bunch of soldiers had descended on the sidewalk, forming a human fence around the area.

With courtesy, jokes, and assurances that they'd get to see the parade, every person in the crowd had been shepherded into the store. They were being segregated now, by sex, and led away from the main sales floor towards the clothes department.

Inspector Jordan didn't like it at all, for the better part of a hundred British citizens had just been detained. Probably it was a breach of their civil rights.

Jordan and his four disguised colleagues, meanwhile, were waiting beside a cash desk. The auburn-haired hooker, Woman Police Constable Joy Witty, was asking the bag lady, "How on earth did you keep making that . . . well, dreadful noise?"

"More to the point, why?" The hobo's voice was indistinct. He was de-greening his teeth and restoring the missing ones with a wad of paper towels. His name was Tupper; he was a detective sergeant drafted in for the day, from a notably lawless district on the other side of the capital.

"Same reason you're got up to look extra foul, laddie," Sergeant Cynthia Ayscough-Willes of Special Branch replied tartly. "Make the public shy away from a grotesque, and they miss the fact that one's a snooper." She had that unique, braying lilt imparted by England's snootier academies for Young Gentlewomen.

"The noise *is* rather a hoot," she grinned. "Used to win bets with it at the hunt ball. All a matter of using one's diaphragm—you could pick it up in a trice," she assured Joy Witty.

Nonplussed for the first time since Mike Jordan had encountered her, Ms. Witty murmured confusedly, "Thanks, but I'm on the pill," and edged away.

Not listening to Sergeant Ayscough-Willes's short lecture on the muscular tissue between lungs and stomach, Inspector Jordan brooded on the coincidence of five undercover coppers colliding at once.

Yet it wasn't such an outlandish circumstance. Criminals were likely to flourish on a day when central London was being brought to a standstill and turned upside down, so their opposition was bound to be thick on the ground.

Jordan was on duty with the Counter-Terrorism Unit, unknowingly competing against Sergeant Ayscough-Willes, also trawling for subversives and fanatics on behalf of the Special Branch. WPC Joy Witty was with the Hotel Crimes Squad—only London and New York have them—while the mechanic, Detective-Constable Porlock from West End Central, and Detective-Sergeant Tupper, the hobo, were hunting pickpockets.

Less a freak than a strong chance, then. But bad luck for Fishy Hook, clobbered by two coppers who knew him and three more keyed up to pounce.

Talking of which, thought In-

spector Jordan resentfully, it didn't take five of them to deal with Fishy Hook, and the parade was due past this spot in about fifty-five minutes. They ought to be out on the street again.

Then he saw the badgeless soldier approaching through the dust-sheeted maze of counters and realized that his hunch had been wrong.

Delete trouble, substitute bad trouble.

Not that the soldier was impressive. Little more than a boy, he wore khaki pants, a green sweater with cloth inserts at shoulders and elbows, and, against regulations, black running shoes. "Come with me, please. We've sort of borrowed the executive canteen, downstairs—the bosses want a chin-wag."

Following the youth, Jordan glimpsed metal and noted, with another twitch of unease, that their guide was carrying a thinly wrapped submachine gun under his arm, as casually as a swagger cane.

Sergeant Tupper, the erstwhile hobo, addressed Jordan in the noncarrying whisper that both convicts and detectives learn.

"That's a Special Air Service trooper, sir. I take it the manure can be said to have struck the air conditioning."

The canteen wasn't large, but space had been made by shoving its tables against a wall, most of their chairs stacked on top. A Dark Suit delegation waited at the far end, with Fishy Hook seated to one side and slightly behind. The pickpocket looked dazed, scared, and rebellious, a sixty-five-year-old urchin wanting his mother.

The SAS man counted them in and shut the door. Inside, Inspector Jordan saw that one of the Dark Suits was Commander Flynn, the head of his own unit, and recognized Commander Derek Cheadle of Special Branch. Also present—the only one in uniform—was a chief superintendent, splendid in best blue and gleaming silver, who seemed out of his depth and was probably an administrative genius specializing in crowd control and traffic.

He saw Commander Torrans, Bomb Squad. And—surprisingly — the distinguished, pinstriped man who had been near him in the crowd.

Commander Cheadle, as bluff and square-rigged as an admiral in mufti, stepped forward.

"There's a crisis," he said, "and not much time. So listen, and talk only if it's vital. All of you saw or took part in the arrest of the man Hook, a persistent pickpocket. Think extra

hard while you listen, maybe you saw something that matters." He took one pace back, deferring to the man in the pinstriped suit. "This is Mr. Browning from the ministry."

Jordan smiled grimly at the ministry's not being specified. He doubted that Browning was the right name.

Browning studied the five for a moment. He did it from behind the veneer of mock diffidence found in the upper reaches of Whitehall and around certain ancient clubs. "I love myself, who do you love, Claude?" Sergeant Tupper said under his breath.

Browning's mannered voice was rich with inflection and nuance, though his expression held weary gravity. "Bear with me, ladies and gentlemen, if I seem discursive. The aim is to persuade you that we're handling something very serious, and impossible either to quantify or exactly to define."

"Jesus," Tupper whispered disgustedly.

"For some time we've been aware of a . . . movement, a conspiracy, if you will. On what's politely termed the far right band of the spectrum and, very possibly, involving people in the Establishment." Browning smoothed his chin. "The boss class," he amended helpfully.

"This movement wants an

outrage guaranteed to generate international shock waves. Approximately two hours ago, we learned that it may well be planned to occur here and now." He checked his watch. "Or rather, less than one hour from now."

Mike Jordan reminded himself to breathe, saw Tupper's fists clench convulsively, heard Joy Witty shudder.

"We must assume a device was planted as long ago as last year," Commander Torrans, the explosives overlord, interrupted, "so it could be behind established brickwork or under concrete that'll look aged by now. Maybe a chain of devices, and they'll be too well concealed to find in a hurry, if at all."

"I'm much obliged," Browning drawled. "Yes—that's the nuts and bolts side, but it's the least important aspect." Torrans went red.

Browning continued. "This is the standard ceremonial route from the airport. All our friends had to do was prepare themselves and wait for the next state occasion."

Detective-Sergeant Tupper swayed forward. "With respect"—his tone belied the formula—"this is wasting bloody time. Divert the motorcade, it'll be starting soon, and evacuate the area!"

"Shut up," Commander Cheadle blared.

Jordan touched Tupper's arm. "That may be what they want. This route's guarded, every rooftop and vantage point checked. Divert the procession, and you send it three miles through streets where there could be a dozen snipers. Or one man with an anti-tank missile, say."

"Jesus," the sergeant repeated.

"Quite." Browning smiled briefly. "I'll only mention, in addition, that clearing a crowd like the one outside, with sufficient urgency to be effective in the time available, could well cause panic and injury, if not loss of life. And thereby massive humiliation to Her Majesty's government."

He paused, a picture of gravity flawed for a moment by whimsy. He might have been a college lecturer sharing a paradox. "Of course, the whole thing may be a tremendous bluff from start to finish, succeeding only if we take it seriously. Or not, as the case may be. Regretfully, *I think* we must opt for seriousness."

"Too bloody right," Detective-Constable Porlock sang out involuntarily, before mumbling an apology and subsiding. Mike Jordan noticed Fishy Hook glance up and smile wanly.

Browning adjusted an errant strand of grey hair. "To proceed. The people we're concerned with—the Group, for want of a better label—seem to be organized on classic lines: small cells, few members knowing more than two or three other members.

"Now, it's very childish, but they use identity cards, just as some of you may have done at school, when you formed secret societies." Browning's sardonic eyes rolled. He was hinting, Mike Jordan understood with a spark of rage, that some of them were still children. He could get to quite dislike Mr. Browning.

"Sadly, our only reliable informant on this organization, er . . . became dead, in the early hours today. Hence our present disarray."

Browning wasn't languid any more, he was a man putting on the best act he could, while his nerves frayed.

"We do know that the device or devices will be detonated — always providing they exist—by somebody who must be relatively close by. The detonator is electronic. Commander Torrans assures me it could be as small and unobtrusive as a cigarette case, for example. So the trigger man, if you'll excuse a descent into thriller jargon, won't have to hide away while

thrusting a plunger into a large box.

"However, according to our informant, the catalyst man—a better phrase than trigger man, on reflection — wants to be as close as he dares. That might entail getting past a crowd-control cordon or into some enclosure being used by the army.

"He had, our informant believed, been given a form of pass. Showing it, as if by chance with any other identification he produced, would enable him to reveal himself to fellow conspirators. They might not know him, d'you see, or he them, but the magic passport would do the trick."

Browning paused, rather shockingly, to lick his lips—reminding Inspector Jordan of a pantomime ogre preparing to eat a victim. "Which implies that the conspiracy has penetrated the police and armed forces.

"Our late and much lamented informant—grass, d'you say?—our *grass* was convinced that this card existed, but he did not survive to tell us what form it took. Not exactly, that's to say: something about a circle." Browning frowned. "Frankly, until his demise, the informant was treated with some, um, reservations. The curse of this affair has been understandable reluctance to take

it seriously. Now we must."

Commander Cheadle of Special Branch, who had been staring at his watch for the past three minutes, rudely bustled to the front.

"Right!" he announced. "Now, the man Hook, the pick-pocket, dipped into four or five pockets before DC Porlock caught him at it. Luckily, Miss . . . ahem . . . the Special Branch lady, had been told something of this secret pass thing before she came on the scene."

Cheadle waved them closer and produced a small leather folder with a snap fastener. Opening it, he disclosed the standard concertina of credit cards. "All faked, Mr. Smith of Nowhere stuff," he told the five. "They aren't for buying things, just to camouflage the joker in the pack."

The commander tapped the topmost card, the same size and shape as the rest. It was dull brown plastic, innocent of letters or figures and blank at a casual glance.

The symbol was maroon, only a shade lighter than the background. A triangle with a circle inside, nothing more.

"Yes," sighed Browning, staring in a vulturine way over Derek Cheadle's shoulder. "The good Mr. Hook relieved the catalytic man of his talisman. Even

if the latter had discovered the loss, he could hardly have sprinted away in that crush. He'll almost certainly be in that group upstairs.

"Awful bore, Hook not remembering him. Makes for such a tedious delay."

Sergeant Ayscough-Willes, her peke's eyes bulging, made a soda-water sound of excitement. "Then it's all right, we've got him. You'll be searching them, so if he kept the trigger-gadget . . . Either there isn't a bomb, only a charade meant to panic us, or he didn't have the nerve to go ahead."

At that moment, the door opened, startling everyone in the room. The badgeless soldier brushed past the others and went into a huddle with Commanders Cheadle and Torrans and Mr. Browning. Then he loped out again.

Browning shot his cuffs and straightened his drooping shoulders with a nearly audible creak. "Everyone detained has now been body-searched. No firing device has been found. Either the man got away or they had a contingency plan and he managed to pass it to somebody else.

"At best, he threw it away, somewhere out there. I picture somebody picking it up and pressing the intriguing little button, to see what it does."

Commander Derek Cheadle had raced the chief superintendent through the door. What Browning called the Group had the advantage, and the motorcade was being diverted.

With a fraction more than forty minutes to spare, it would be an agonizingly tricky venture. Soon public address vans would tour this half mile of abandoned route, announcing the change. At least it would be easier to move the throng away. It might even be done in time.

Probably not, however, when the residents were taken into account. The available police could saturate the amended route and evacuate the old one, but not simultaneously.

Browning's arrogant, spritely voice lanced across the chatter of those left behind. "There is still a device, and the catalyst is at large. This group, cabal, gang, wants an outrage and they are about to discover that we know it. They'll blow the blasted thing anyway, any carnage is better than none. They must and will have blood!"

He'd contrived to sound fairly fanatical himself. And look it, face set, nostrils flared. Mike Jordan thought that, affectations and all, Browning was formidable, a better man to have on your side than playing against you.

Detective-Constable Porlock spoke to Fishy Hook. "Don't be a fool to yourself, Fishy. You lifted that thing, you've heard what could happen. There's a couple of million people out there—women, kiddies, people who never harmed anyone in their flaming lives. *They won't all get away.*"

"It's no good," said Browning. "He doesn't know who the card came from."

Fishy Hook cringed under the drilling of all those six pairs of eyes. "Well, I *don't* know! I just got in among 'em, they was packed like sardines, remember."

Browning spoke quietly to DC Porlock. "If you saw even one person he robbed, that will help. Elimination, if nothing more. We'll hold those people until everyone here has satisfied me they cannot contribute the tiniest piece of data."

As if they might doubt his sincerity, Mr. Browning added, "I have to go away eventually and give the prime minister a verbal situation report—but that will take no more than an hour, all told. I shall be back, and our meeting of minds will continue until each and every one of you is mentally drained and exhausted."

Detective-Sergeant Tupper sucked his teeth loudly. He contrived, wordlessly, to announce

that Browning loved the sound of his own voice, and that Tupper wasn't impressed by men with the prime minister's ear.

"It wasn't a woman, anyway," Hook blurted out. "I only work fellers." He bobbed and twinkled at WPC Witty. "Saves misunderstandings, girlie, even if it's less fun for me."

Browning struck him. Fishy Hook's howl was of surprise rather than pain. Joy Witty said, "No need for that." Mike Jordan and DS Tupper exchanged wooden looks, Sergeant Ayscough-Willes shifted her deplorable rubber boots, and Commander Flynn, who had not yet uttered a word, started whistling between his teeth.

DC Porlock broke the spell. He spoke unwillingly, doggedly. "I didn't see a thing while Fishy was working, sir. I caught sight of him, granted. I stared at him for a minute before it clicked. I just *knew* what he was up to, that's all. I didn't see a thing." The blue chin pushed forward a fraction. "I'm getting too old for this lark. Not up to it, or I *would* have caught him at it. And this cata-wozzit merchant, I expect. It was what I was there for, and it looks like I messed it up."

Inspector Jordan wanted to say: "That took courage, mate. More power to you." But it

wasn't a comment to be made in public. Joy Witty obviously felt the same way. She patted Porlock's shoulder.

Mr. Browning fetched a chair and sat wrong way round, arms folded on the back.

"Very well." He rolled an eye at Hook. "Don't make me repeat myself, as it were, you loathsome little man. This is not a joking matter; or when it is, I will make them." He smiled at the others, without great response.

Browning's long arm unfolded and he tapped Fishy Hook's knee, making the pick-pocket wince and hitch his own chair back. "I find it hard to swallow, that you could abstract—what was it?—three billfolds, a large sum of cash in a money clip, and that credit-card folder without knowing whence they came."

"I wasn't looking," Hook answered. "You just get next to a toff or somebody who looks like they're worth a few bob, and slip away again, sharpish."

"That's the way they work, sir," DC Porlock confirmed, raggedly. "A good dip — pick-pocket — avoids eye contact. Somebody looks you in the face, it attracts your attention. He doesn't need that."

Fishy Hook proved just then that he wasn't a lightning thinker. Suddenly he was on

his feet. "Here, we could all get blowed up! I want to go to the nick, it's my right."

Browning shoved him back into the chair. "You're safe enough here, my dear sir. We're in an excellent shelter."

"Bloody hell, you're right," Sergeant Tupper said. "This store's a steel framed building, thick walls. They built to last, in the thirties."

He gazed around the half-circle. "Get it? This trigger man, he's got to use a transmitter. That's what we're talking about, with all this rubbish about catalysts and such. He could be up there among those suspects, with the transmitter stashed. Dropped it on the floor as they all came in. He can't use it in here. The signal won't get out, too much interference."

Browning nodded encouragingly.

Tupper said, "The transmitter's small, right?"

"We believe so," Browning agreed, almost dreamily. "The size of a cigarette case, pack of cigarettes, candy bar. You could even disguise it to evade a perfunctory search—make it look like a transistor pocket calculator."

Sergeant Tupper chortled. "Okay, it's small. So, even with transistors or microchips or whatever, it's not all that strong, high-powered. It'd never work

from in here—but *that bloke mustn't be let go.*

"He might just have the gall to pick it up on his way out: whoops, loose shoelace, must just tie it, and there it is, palmed. Until he goes outdoors."

Browning crossed the room in long, scissor strides and yanked the door open, issuing rapid orders for the store to be searched all over again, and for detained members of the crowd to be escorted when they went to the bathroom. His febrile energy was flaring when he came back. "The affair marches, albeit at elephantine pace, with many a lurch and stumble." He beamed at them; perhaps he imagined it was a compliment.

Mike Jordan was remembering something Hook had said. It was a lunatic idea, but it wouldn't let go. Which was awkward, since acting on it would involve him in unpleasantness.

Give over, his prudent side sneered, it'll land you into getting invited to resign and find your true level, parking cars or road sweeping for the Greater London Council.

He cleared his throat. "I'd like a word with Hook in private. I arrested him years ago, Wimbledon Broadway after the dog races. I might have a way to jog his memory."

"Nobody leaves this room,"

Browning declared.

Jordan noticed that DC Porlock was looking at him. Porlock knew a lot about Fishy Hook, had been thinking of little else for the past hour, and probably wanted to say that the pickpocket had never been in trouble at Wimbledon.

"Just over there in the corner," Jordan said hastily. "A private word. One on one can pay dividends, Mr. Browning." As he spoke, he tried to catch Sergeant Tupper's eye.

But what message could he hope to pass? *Watch them? Watch who?* Sergeant Tupper yawned. "All right, get on with it," Browning said.

Fishy Hook was puzzled as Jordan led him away, an arm round the little man's shoulders. "That was out of order, his slapping you like that, Fishy."

"Yeah, it was. Bloody nutter. Sadists, all them toffs. Snobs and bullies."

They were in the corner now, and Mike Jordan had his back to the others. "It was out of order," he hissed, "because he ought to have *killed* you. But I will, I'll top you sure as judgment, if you don't do exactly what I tell you."

In retrospect, Inspector Jordan was proud of Fishy Hook. Not that he did much—threw the lines

away, darling, as stage folk say—but that little was delivered with touching sincerity and eagerness to please.

Jordan marched the pickpocket back, fingers biting into Hook's shoulder at the cup of the collarbone. "Fishy hasn't been frank with us. No flat lies, but not all the truth. Now we'll get the unedited version."

Browning raised an eyebrow, skeptically. Commander Flynn was as stoical as ever, with his meaningless half smile. Dapper Commander Torrans, who'd been a keen thief-taker in his day, looked up sharply, head cocked like an eager dog's.

Porlock was frowning, intent on Fishy Hook, while Sergeant Tupper, having doffed his filthy jacket—feeling the stuffy heat, perhaps, or merely restless—looked slightly more thuggish than before, shoulders very wide under the smelly blue jersey.

Mike Jordan forced himself not to look too long at any of them, nor at Joy Witty, who had also found a chair and was showing a lot of leg, to the abstracted disapproval of Sergeant Ayscough-Willes.

His thumb burrowed into the wretched Fishy Hook but he spoke to DC Porlock. "What's the first thing a dip does, once he's taken what he wants?"

"Dumps the gear, of course." Porlock nodded to himself.

"Links him to the crime, see. Posts it in a letter box, if it's a billfold or a small purse . . . and if he's a decent bloke. Or down a sewer grating if he's not."

Jordan gave Fishy a small, priming shake. "But you were caught with the stuff on you, still."

"I couldn't ditch it! Too many people around. I hardly dared take a gander at what I got, after I got it," said Fishy. He was complaining as much as explaining.

Mike Jordan looked at Browning. "You run a great quiz, Mr. B, but it's all been a waste of time. A bloody farce, like the one that started it. Nothing's going to blow up, nobody's going to get hurt. The world-shaking terrorist outrage is cancelled indefinitely. And just because we've been doing the cloak-and-dagger bit instead of honest police slog. Like asking Fishy Hook the right questions."

Browning rose. "I wish I could share your optimism."

"You will." The thumb burrowed again. "How were you sure you couldn't lose that stuff, Fishy? Big crowd, mostly looking front, they'd never notice."

The pickpocket jerked free to stand rubbing his shoulder. "I know my business! Nearly got spotted the first time, bunging that thing down the grating."

He stopped abruptly, hearing so many breaths sucked in.

"I didn't lie, I *forgot*," he whined. "Took those credit cards, moved along, went back, got the same bloke's billfold. Only it wasn't, it was one of them pocket adding machine things, no use to me. Some chap looked at me very old-fashioned like, after I dropped it in the sewer, so I kept everything after that."

Jordan said, "So the catalyst man got hustled twice. He's lost the identity card *and* the firing gadget. That's in the sewer system somewhere, safe as houses. He can't do a thing. Maybe he hasn't even missed it, yet."

Browning's reflex movement was tiny and virtually still-born. Mike Jordan almost missed the betraying motion. His money, and probably a shade too much attention, had been on Commander Flynn, so suspiciously mute.

But Sergeant Tupper had taken an early, instinctive, and ever-deepening dislike to Browning, whom he had categorized, mentally, as a toffee-nosed, insufferable, jumped-up-never-to-come-down git. He'd been glowering at Browning steadily, and he read the sign instantly and flawlessly. "Hello," he said, loading that simple word with a cynical menace only a London copper

can achieve. "Hello, what's *your* trouble? Missed something, have you?"

And Browning dithered. He restarted the movement, as if to twitch his lapel, decided against the credibility of that, and sent his hand diving inside the beautifully cut jacket.

Mike Jordan lunged for him but fell over Fishy Hook, who squealed like a snared rabbit. Joy Witty went over backwards, chair and all, as she kicked out at Browning without wasting time getting up. Her pointed toe hit a nerve beside his knee, but something black showed between his fingers as his hand emerged from his pocket.

Perhaps the signal was jammed by the basement walls. Or perhaps they'd simply delayed him by a crucial slice of a second. Suddenly it was all academic because Tupper, growling worse than a mad mastiff, was applying an armlock with such verve that Browning screamed and the firing device sailed across the room.

Cynthia Ayscough-Willes caught it. She had always been good at cricket.

The long day was dying at last, in one of those rare London twilights when distant rooflines seem cut

out of black pasteboard sharp against a saffron sky, shading up through lemon-yellow to palest blue. The new moon's sickle was balanced by the first diamond pinpoint of a star. But the tranquillity ended at street level. The parade was long over, and apart from a surprising lack of spectators along certain parts of the route, few VIP's had noticed anything amiss. Nevertheless, the streets were still crowded with pampered tourists and hardy backpackers, with local people wanting beer and diversion and a last look at the abundant flags and decorations before they were taken down until the next time.

Joy Witty dropped back in the taxi seat with a sigh of satisfaction. She and Mike Jordan had just beaten two other couples to it, after a brisk skirmish on the sidewalk.

To the victor the spoils — though Jordan couldn't see how a date with Ms. Witty would spoil anything. He'd asked her out to dinner, she'd countered that they weren't dressed for any restaurant she would be seen dead in, she'd suggested her place.

She'd told him she shared a house at Streatham with two fellow WPC's, which Jordan thought was a bit of a pity. She hadn't told him that the other two were away at Salisbury, on

a forensics course. She planned to get something from the Chinese takeaway next door to her home, and they'd drink wine and find what music they agreed on, and generally see what they would see. She liked keeping her options open until the last possible moment.

She was also very persistent.

Across the United Kingdom, arrests were being made. Not that many, for the Group had been small. Cheated of his horrific gesture, shattered by the pressures of serving two masters, Browning had talked and talked. Cell system or no, the key figures he named were soon naming others. . . .

"You keep saying you didn't know it was him," WPC Witty remarked, rather crossly, "but how did you crack the thing, anyway?"

Inspector Jordan was tiring of answering that, but it was in a good or at least pleasurable cause, so he went through it again.

"Well, from the off, I thought the catalyst man—as that nutter Browning called himself — *ought* to have been among those detained. Fishy Hook lifted those cards from him, and everybody within twenty yards or so was pulled right in.

"But the search didn't locate the firing gadget, in the trigger

man's possession or otherwise. So I got to thinking . . . supposing the catalyst man was in the store but hadn't been searched?

"It worried me, none of us five undercover lot getting searched, for instance. Sloppy procedure. Except it wasn't, because Fishy said he never robbed women and only tried toffs." Mike Jordan grimaced at his own disgraceful clothes.

"That started me thinking about everything Fishy had told us. Like not looking at faces—and always hitting toffs, people who looked moneyed. How'd he decide? By their clothes, and to an old boy like Fishy Hook, that meant men in suits."

Inspector Jordan laughed shortly. "And there they were, luv, in the store and pulling our strings. All those commanders and high mucky-mucks in their nice gear. Browning said it himself, the Group was part of the Establishment. Think about it—who doesn't get searched when we do our thing?"

Joy nodded. "The people who order the search."

"Right. I felt it had to be that, but which one was it? I fancied Flynn, my guv'nor—lost his tongue all of a sudden. Turns out the poor old beggar came on duty with a terrible bout of laryngitis, talking was agony.

"Anyway, if I was wrong, I'd

just get in trouble. But if our man *was* among them, and I didn't pick right—then he'd get away at the first excuse, and blow the bomb. I couldn't rely on myself, he had to be made to tell me."

Joy frowned thoughtfully. "I'm surprised at Browning's falling for that trick. The gadget must have been burning a hole in his pocket all along, he'd know it hadn't been taken."

Mike Jordan shrugged, looking out of the side window. "Hey, your purse!"

She convulsed, snatching at her lap. Jordan said, "You were holding it, luv, you knew you had it, but that didn't stop you checking, eh?"

"Fair enough, you're right."

He nodded smugly. "I'm not an expert on dips, like DC Porlock, but I did remember that old stroke of theirs. Somebody shouts, 'Pickpockets!' and every mug starts making sure he's still got his valuables. So the dips know exactly which pocket to go for. Human nature, you can't stop yourself."

The cab pulled up. As he reached for his wallet, Mike Jordan had a terrible presentiment. His stock as a supercop was about to plunge.

It must have happened in the scrimmage to claim the cab. Somebody had picked Inspector Jordan's pocket.

WPC Witty was fumbling for her door key. He gave her a sickly smile.

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

The "populations" give the number of the letters in the words, thus: Strawpnow—583,149 means the 5th, the 8th, the 3rd, the 1st, the 4th, and the 9th letters in this word. This spells Warsaw. Doing the same for the other five words, we get:

ATTACK NORTH REGION
WARSAW DEFENSE WEAK

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Bag of Sand by Bess

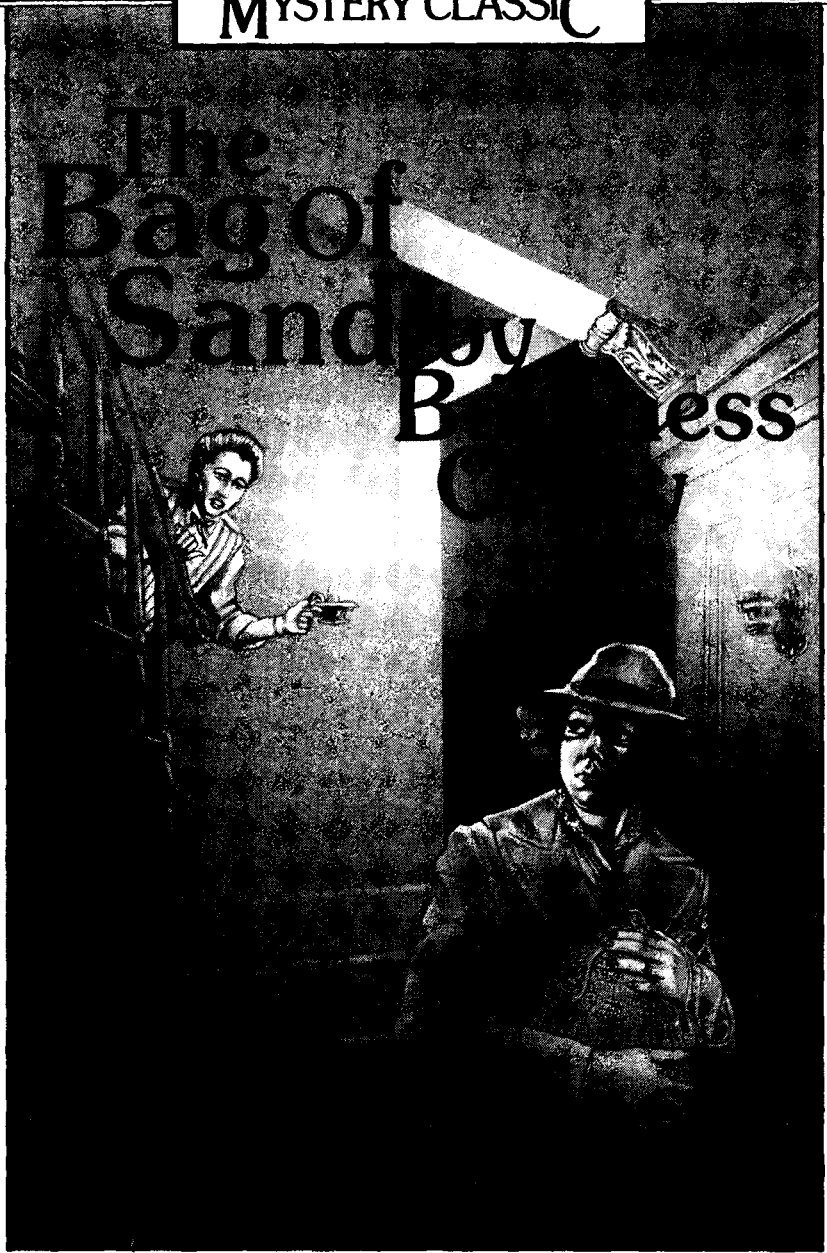


Illustration by Ray Lago

Of course, I knew at once by the expression of her face that morning that my dear lady had some important business on hand.

She had a bundle in her arms, consisting of a shabby-looking coat and skirt and a very dowdy hat trimmed with bunches of cheap calico roses.

"Put on these things at once, Mary," she said curtly, "for you are going to apply for the situation of 'good plain cook,' so mind you look the part."

"But where in the world—?" I gasped in astonishment.

"In the house of Mr. Nicholas Jones, in Eaton Terrace," she interrupted dryly, "the one occupied until recently by his sister, the late Mrs. Dunstan. Mrs. Jones is advertising for a cook, and you must get that place."

As you know, I have carried obedience to the level of a fine art. Nor was I altogether astonished that my dear lady had at last been asked to put one of her dainty fingers in that Dunstan pie, which was puzzling our fellows more completely than any other case I have ever known.

I don't know if you remember the many circumstances, the various contradictions which were cropping up at every turn, and which baffled our ablest detectives at the very moment when they thought themselves most near the solution of that strange mystery.

Mrs. Dunstan herself was a very uninteresting individual; self-righteous, self-conscious, and fat, a perfect type of the moneyed middle-class woman whose balance at the local bank is invariably heavier than that of her neighbors. Her niece, Violet Frostwicke, lived with her: a smart, pretty girl, inordinately fond of dainty clothes and other luxuries which money can give. Being totally impecunious herself, she bore with the older woman's constantly varying caprices with almost angelic patience, a fact probably attributable to Mrs. Dunstan's testamentary intentions, which, as she often averred, were in favor of her niece.

In addition to these two ladies, the household consisted of three servants and Miss Cruikshank. The latter was a quiet, unassuming girl who was by way of being secretary and lady-help to Mrs. Dunstan, but who, in reality, was nothing but a willing drudge. Up betimes in the morning, she combined the work of a housekeeper with that of an upper servant. She interviewed the tradespeople, kept the servants in order, and ironed and smartened up Miss Violet's blouses. A Cinderella, in fact.

Taken from LADY MOLLY OF SCOTLAND YARD by Baroness Orczy; copyright by the Estate of the late Baroness Orczy.

Mrs. Dunstan kept a cook and two maids, all of whom had been with her for years. In addition to these, a charwoman came very early in the morning to light fires, clean boots, and do the front steps.

On November 22nd, 1907—for the early history of this curious drama dates back to that year—the charwoman, who had been employed at Mrs. Dunstan's house in Eaton Terrace for some considerable time, sent word in the morning that in future she would be unable to come. Her husband had been obliged to move to lodgings nearer to his work, and she herself could not undertake to come the greater distance at the early hour at which Mrs. Dunstan required her.

The woman had written a very nice letter explaining these facts, and sent it by hand, stating at the same time that the bearer of the note was a very respectable woman, a friend of her own, who would be very pleased to "oblige" Mrs. Dunstan by taking on the morning's work.

I must tell you that the message and its bearer arrived at Eaton Terrace somewhere about six A.M., when no one was down except the Cinderella of the house, Miss Cruikshank.

She saw the woman, liked her appearance, and there and then engaged her to do the work, subject to Mrs. Dunstan's approval.

The woman, who had given her name as Mrs. Thomas, seemed very quiet and respectable. She said that she lived close by, in St. Peter's Mews, and therefore could come as early as Mrs. Dunstan wished. In fact, from that day, she came every morning at five thirty A.M., and by seven o'clock had finished her work, and was able to go home.

If, in addition to these details, I tell you that, at that time, pretty Miss Violet Frostwicke was engaged to a young Scotsman, Mr. David Athol, of whom her aunt totally disapproved, I shall have put before you all the personages who, directly or indirectly, were connected with that drama, the final act of which has not yet been witnessed either by the police or by the public.

2

On the following New Year's Eve, Mrs. Dunstan, as was her invariable custom on that day, went to her married brother's house to dine and to see the New Year in.

During her absence the usual thing occurred at Eaton Terrace.

Miss Violet Frostwicke took the opportunity of inviting Mr. David Athol to spend the evening with her.

Mrs. Dunstan's servants, mind you, all knew of the engagement between the young people, and with the characteristic sentimentality of their class, connived at these secret meetings and helped to hoodwink the irascible old aunt.

Mr. Athol was a good looking young man, whose chief demerit lay in his total lack of money or prospects. Also he was by way of being an actor, another deadly sin in the eyes of the puritanically-minded old lady.

Already on more than one occasion, there had been vigorous wordy warfare 'twixt Mr. Athol and Mrs. Dunstan, and the latter had declared that if Violet chose to take up with this mountebank, she should never see a penny of her aunt's money now or in the future.

The young man did not come very often to Eaton Terrace, but on this festive New Year's Eve, when Mrs. Dunstan was not expected to be home until long after midnight, it seemed too splendid an opportunity for an ardent lover to miss.

As ill-luck would have it, Mrs. Dunstan had not felt very well after her copious dinner, and her brother, Mr. Nicholas Jones, escorted her home soon after ten o'clock.

Jane, the parlor maid who opened the front door, was, in her own graphic language, "knocked all of a heap" when she saw her mistress, knowing full well that Mr. Athol was still in the dining room with Miss Violet, and that Miss Cruikshank was at that very moment busy getting him a whisky and soda.

Meanwhile the coat and hat in the hall had revealed the young man's presence in the house.

For a moment Mrs. Dunstan paused, whilst Jane stood by trembling with fright. Then the old lady turned to Mr. Nicholas Jones, who was still standing on the doorstep, and said quietly:

"Will you telephone over to Mr. Blenkinsop, Nick, the first thing in the morning, and tell him I'll be at his office by ten o'clock?"

Mr. Blenkinsop was Mrs. Dunstan's solicitor, and as Jane explained to the cook later on, what could such an appointment mean but a determination to cut Miss Violet out of the missis's will with the proverbial shilling?

After this Mrs. Dunstan took leave of her brother and went straight into the dining room.

According to the subsequent testimony of all three servants, the

mistress "went on dreadful." Words were not easily distinguishable from behind the closed door, but it seems that, immediately she entered, Mrs. Dunstan's voice was raised as if in terrible anger, and a few moments later Miss Violet fled crying from the dining room, and ran quickly upstairs.

Whilst the door was thus momentarily opened and shut, the voice of the old lady was heard saying, in majestic wrath:

"That's what you have done. Get out of this house. As for her, she'll never see a penny of my money, and she may starve for aught I care!"

The quarrel seems to have continued for a short while after that, the servants being too deeply awed by those last vindictive words which they had heard to take much note of what went on subsequently.

Mrs. Dunstan and Mr. Athol were closeted together for some time; but apparently the old lady's wrath did not subside, for when she marched up to bed an hour later she was heard to say:

"Out of this house she shall go, and the first thing in the morning, too. I'll have no goings-on with a mountebank like you."

Miss Cruikshank was terribly upset.

"It is a frightful blow for Miss Violet," she said to cook, "but perhaps Mrs. Dunstan will feel more forgiving in the morning. I'll take her up a glass of champagne now. She is very fond of that, and it will help her to get to sleep."

Miss Cruikshank went up with the champagne, and told cook to see Mr. Athol out of the house; but the young man, who seemed very anxious and agitated, would not go away immediately. He stayed in the dining room, smoking, for a while, and when the two younger servants went up to bed, he asked cook to let him remain until he had seen Miss Violet once more, for he was sure she would come down again—he had asked Miss Cruikshank to beg of her to do so.

Mrs. Kennett, the cook, was a kind-hearted old woman. She had taken the young people under her special protection, and felt very vexed that the course of true love should not be allowed to run quite smoothly. So she told Mr. Athol to make himself happy and comfortable in the dining room, and she would sit up by the fire in the library until he was ready to go.

The good soul thereupon made up the fire in the library, drew a chair in front of it, and—went fast to sleep.

Suddenly something awoke her. She sat up and looked round in

that dazed manner peculiar to people just aroused from deep sleep.

She looked at the clock; it was past three. Surely, she thought, it must have been Mr. Athol calling to her which had caused her to wake. She went into the hall, where the gas had not yet been turned off, and there she saw Miss Violet, fully dressed and wearing a hat and coat, in the very act of going out at the front door.

In the cook's own words, before she could ask a question or even utter a sound, the young girl had opened the front door, which was still on the latch, and then banged it to again, she herself having disappeared in the darkness of the street beyond.

Mrs. Kennett ran to the door and out into the street as fast as her old legs would let her; but the night was an exceptionally foggy one. Violet, no doubt, had walked rapidly away, and there came no answer to Mrs. Kennett's repeated calls.

Thoroughly upset, and not knowing what to do, the good woman went back into the house. Mr. Athol had evidently left, for there was no sign of him in the dining room or elsewhere. She then went upstairs and knocked at Mrs. Dunstan's door. To her astonishment the gas was still burning in her mistress's room, as she could see a thin ray of light filtering through the keyhole. At her first knock there came a quick, impatient answer:

"What is it?"

"Miss Violet, 'm," said the cook, who was too agitated to speak very coherently, "she is gone——"

"The best thing she could do," came promptly from the other side of the door. "You go to bed, Mrs. Kennett, and don't worry."

Whereupon the gas was suddenly turned off inside the room, and, in spite of Mrs. Kennett's further feeble protests, no other word issued from the room save another impatient:

"Go to bed."

The cook then did as she was bid; but before going to bed she made the round of the house, turned off all the gas, and finally bolted the front door.

3

Some three hours later the servants were called, as usual by Miss Cruikshank, who then went down to open the area door to Mrs. Thomas, the charwoman.

At half past six when Mary the housemaid came down, candle in hand, she saw the charwoman a flight or two lower down, also

apparently in the act of going downstairs. This astonished Mary not a little, as the woman's work lay entirely in the basement, and she was supposed never to come to the upper floors.

The woman, though walking rapidly down the stairs, seemed, moreover, to be carrying something heavy.

"Anything wrong, Mrs. Thomas?" asked Mary, in a whisper.

The woman looked up, pausing a moment immediately under the gas bracket, the by-pass of which shed a feeble light upon her and upon her burden. The latter Mary recognized as the bag containing the sand which, on frosty mornings, had to be strewn on the front steps of the house.

On the whole, though she certainly was puzzled, Mary did not think very much about the incident then. As was her custom, she went into the housemaid's closet, got the hot water for Miss Cruikshank's bath, and carried it to the latter's room, where she also pulled up the blinds and got things ready generally. For Miss Cruikshank usually ran down in her dressing gown, and came up to tidy herself later on.

As a rule, by the time the three servants got downstairs, it was nearly seven, and Mrs. Thomas had generally gone by that time; but on this occasion Mary was earlier. Miss Cruikshank was busy in the kitchen getting Mrs. Dunstan's tea ready. Mary spoke about seeing Mrs. Thomas on the stairs with the bag of sand, and Miss Cruikshank, too, was very astonished at the occurrence.

Mrs. Kennett was not yet down, and the charwoman apparently had gone; her work had been done as usual, and the sand was strewn over the stone steps in front, as the frosty fog had rendered them very slippery.

At a quarter past seven Miss Cruikshank went up with Mrs. Dunstan's tea, and less than two minutes later a fearful scream rang through the entire house, followed by the noise of breaking crockery.

In an instant the two maids ran upstairs, straight to Mrs. Dunstan's room, the door of which stood wide open.

The first thing Mary and Jane were conscious of was a terrific smell of gas, then of Miss Cruikshank, with eyes dilated with horror, staring at the bed in front of her, whereon lay Mrs. Dunstan, with one end of a piece of india rubber piping still resting in her mouth, her jaw having dropped in death. The other end of that piece of piping was attached to the burner of a gas bracket on the wall close by.

Every window in the room was fastened and the curtains drawn. The whole room reeked of gas.

Mrs. Dunstan had been asphyxiated by its fumes.

4

A year went by after the discovery of the mysterious tragedy, and I can assure you that our fellows at the Yard had one of the toughest jobs in connection with the case that ever fell to their lot. Just think of all the contradictions which met them at every turn.

Firstly, the disappearance of Miss Violet.

No sooner had the women in the Dunstan household roused themselves sufficiently from their horror at the terrible discovery which they had just made than they were confronted with another almost equally awful fact—awful, of course, because of its connection with the primary tragedy.

Miss Violet Frostwicke had gone. Her room was empty, her bed had not been slept in. She herself had been seen by the cook, Mrs. Kennett, stealing out of the house at dead of night.

To connect the pretty, dainty young girl even remotely with a crime so hideous, so callous, as the deliberate murder of an old woman, who had been as a mother to her, seemed absolutely out of the question, and by tacit consent the four women who now remained in the desolate and gloom-laden house at Eaton Terrace forbore to mention Miss Violet Frostwicke's name either to police or doctor.

Both these, of course, had been summoned immediately; Miss Cruikshank sending Mary to the police station and then to Dr. Folwell, in Eaton Square, whilst Jane went off in a cab to fetch Mr. Nicholas Jones, who, fortunately, had not yet left for his place of business.

The doctor's and the police inspector's first thought, on examining the *mise en scène* of the terrible tragedy, was that Mrs. Dunstan had committed suicide. It was practically impossible to imagine that a woman in full possession of health and strength would allow a piece of india rubber piping to be fixed between her teeth, and would, without a struggle, continue to inhale the poisonous fumes which would mean certain death. Yet there were no marks of injury upon the body, nothing to show how sufficient unconsciousness had been produced in the victim to permit of the miscreant completing his awesome deed.

But the theory of suicide set up by Dr. Folwell was promptly refuted by the most cursory examination of the room.

Though the drawers were found closed, they had obviously been turned over, as if the murderer had been in search either of money or papers, or the key of the safe.

The latter, on investigation, was found to be open, whilst the key lay on the floor close by. A brief examination of the safe revealed the fact that the tin boxes must have been ransacked, for they contained neither money nor important papers now, whilst the gold and platinum settings of necklaces, bracelets, and a tiara showed that the stones—which, as Mr. Nicholas Jones subsequently averred, were of considerable value—had been carefully if somewhat clumsily taken out by obviously inexperienced hands.

On the whole, therefore, appearances suggested deliberate, systematic, and very leisurely robbery, which wholly contradicted the theory of suicide.

Then suddenly the name of Miss Frostwicke was mentioned. Who first brought it on the *tapis* no one subsequently could say; but in a moment the whole story of the young girl's engagement to Mr. Athol, in defiance of her aunt's wishes, the quarrel of the night before, and the final disappearance of both young people from the house during the small hours of the morning, was dragged from the four unwilling witnesses by the able police inspector.

Nay, more. One very little unpleasant circumstance was detailed by one of the maids and corroborated by Miss Cruikshank.

It seems that when the latter took up the champagne to Mrs. Dunstan, the old lady desired Miss Violet to come to her room. Mary, the housemaid, was on the stairs when she saw the young girl, still dressed in her evening gown of white chiffon, her eyes still swollen with tears, knocking at her aunt's door.

The police inspector was busy taking notes, already building up in his mind a simple, if very sensational, case against Violet Frostwicke, when Mrs. Kennett promptly upset all his calculations.

Miss Violet could have had nothing to do with the murder of her aunt, seeing that Mrs. Dunstan was alive and actually spoke to the cook when the latter knocked at her bedroom door after she had seen the young girl walk out of the house.

Then came the question of Mr. Athol. But, if you remember, it was quite impossible even to begin to build up a case against the young man. His own statement that he left the house at about midnight, having totally forgotten to rouse the cook, when he did

so, was amply corroborated from every side.

The cabman who took him up to the corner of Eaton Terrace at eleven fifty P.M. was one witness in his favor; his landlady at his rooms in Jermyn Street, who let him in, since he had mislaid his latchkey, and who took him up some tea at seven o'clock the next morning, was another; whilst, when Mary saw Miss Violet going into her aunt's room, the clock at St. Peter's, Eaton Square, was just striking twelve.

I dare say you think I ought by now to have mentioned the charwoman, Mrs. Thomas, who represented the final, most complete, most hopeless contradiction in this remarkable case.

Mrs. Thomas was seen by Mary, the housemaid, at half past six o'clock in the morning, coming down from the upper floors, where she had no business to be, and carrying the bag of sand used for strewing over the slippery front door steps.

The bag of sand, of course, was always kept in the area.

The moment that bag of sand was mentioned Dr. Folwell gave a curious gasp. Here, at least, was the solution to one mystery. The victim had been stunned whilst still in bed by a blow on the head dealt with that bag of sand; and whilst she was unconscious the callous miscreant had robbed her and finally asphyxiated her with the gas fumes.

Where was the woman who, at half past six in the morning, was seen in possession of the silent instrument of death?

Mrs. Thomas had disappeared. The last that was then or ever has been seen of her was when she passed underneath the dim light of a by-pass on the landing, as if tired out with the weight which she was carrying.

Since then, as you know, the police have been unswerving in their efforts to find Mrs. Thomas. The address which she had given in St. Peter's Mews was found to be false. No one of that name or appearance had ever been seen there.

The woman who was supposed to have sent her with a letter of recommendation to Mrs. Dunstan knew nothing of her. She swore that she had never sent anyone with a letter to Mrs. Dunstan. She gave up her work there one day because she found it too hard at such an early hour in the morning; but she never heard anything more from her late employer after that.

Strange, wasn't it, that two people should have disappeared out of that house on that same memorable night?

Of course, you will remember the tremendous sensation that was

caused some twenty-four hours later, when it transpired that the young person who had thrown herself into the river from Waterloo Bridge on that same eventful morning, and whose body was subsequently recovered and conveyed to the Thames police station, was identified as Miss Violet Frostwicke, the niece of the lady who had been murdered in her own house in Eaton Terrace.

Neither money nor diamonds were found on poor Miss Violet. She had herself given the most complete proof that she, at least, had no hand in robbing or killing Mrs. Dunstan.

The public wondered why she took her aunt's wrath and her probable disinheritance so fearfully to heart, and sympathized with Mr. David Athol for the terribly sad loss which he had sustained.

But Mrs. Thomas, the charwoman, had not yet been found.

5

I think I looked an extremely respectable, good plain cook when I presented myself at the house in Eaton Terrace in response to the advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph*.

As, in addition to my prepossessing appearance, I also asked very low wages and declared myself ready to do anything except scour the front steps and the stone area, I was immediately engaged by Mrs. Jones, and was duly installed in the house the following day under the name of Mrs. Curwen.

But few events had occurred here since the discovery of the dual tragedy, now more than a year ago, and none that had thrown any light upon the mystery which surrounded it.

The verdict at the inquest had been one of wilful murder against a person known as Mrs. Thomas, the weight of evidence, coupled with her disappearance, having been very heavy against her; and there was a warrant out for her arrest.

Mrs. Dunstan had died intestate. To the astonishment of all those in the know, she had never signed the will which Messrs. Blenkinsop and Blenkinsop had drafted for her, and wherein she bequeathed twenty thousand pounds and the lease of her house in Eaton Terrace to her beloved niece, Violet Frostwicke, one thousand pounds to Miss Cruikshank, and other, smaller, legacies to friends or servants.

In default of a will, Mr. Nicholas Jones, only brother of the deceased, became possessed of all her wealth.

He was a very rich man himself, and many people thought that

he ought to give Miss Cruikshank the thousand pounds which the poor girl had thus lost through no fault of her own.

What his ultimate intentions were with regard to this no one could know. For the present he contented himself with moving to Eaton Terrace with his family; and, as his wife was a great invalid, he asked Miss Cruikshank to continue to make her home in the house and to help in its management.

Neither the diamonds nor the money stolen from Mrs. Dunstan's safe were ever traced. It seems that Mrs. Dunstan, a day or two before her death, had sold a freehold cottage which she owned near Teddington. The money, as is customary, had been handed over to her in gold, in Mr. Blenkinsop's office, and she had been foolish enough not to bank it immediately. This money and the diamonds had been the chief spoils of her assailant. And all the while no trace of Mrs. Thomas, in spite of the most strenuous efforts on the part of the police to find her.

Strangely enough, when I had been in Eaton Terrace about three days, and was already getting very tired of early rising and hard work, the charwoman there fell ill one day and did not come to her work as usual.

I, of course, grumbled like six, for I had to be on my hands and knees the next morning scrubbing stone steps, and my thoughts of Lady Molly, for the moment, were not quite as loyal as they usually were.

Suddenly I heard a shuffling footstep close behind me. I turned and saw a rough-looking, ill-dressed woman standing at the bottom of the steps.

"What do you want?" I asked sourly, for I was in a very bad humor.

"I saw you scrubbing them steps, miss," she replied in a raucous voice; "my 'usband is out of work, and the children hain't 'ad no breakfast this morning. I'd do them steps, miss, if you'd give me a trifle."

The woman certainly did not look very prepossessing, with her shabby, broad-brimmed hat hiding the upper part of her face, and her skirt, torn and muddy, pinned up untidily round her stooping figure.

However, I did not think that I could be doing anything very wrong by letting her do this one bit of rough work, which I hated, so I agreed to give her sixpence, and left her there with kneeling-mat and scrubbing brush and went in, leaving, however, the front door open.

In the hall I met Miss Cruikshank, who, as usual, was down before everybody else.

"What is it, Curwen?" she asked, for through the open door she had caught sight of the woman kneeling on the step.

"A woman, miss," I replied, somewhat curtly. "She offered to do the steps. I thought Mrs. Jones wouldn't mind, as Mrs. Callaghan hasn't turned up."

Miss Cruikshank hesitated an instant, and then walked up to the front door.

At the same moment the woman looked up, rose from her knees, and boldly went up to accost Miss Cruikshank.

"You'll remember me, miss," she said, in her raucous voice. "I used to work for Mrs. Dunstan once. My name is Mrs. Thomas."

No wonder Miss Cruikshank uttered a quickly smothered cry of horror. Thinking that she would faint, I ran to her assistance; but she waved me aside and then said quite quietly:

"This poor woman's mind is deranged. She is no more Mrs. Thomas than I am. Perhaps we had better send for the police."

"Yes, miss; p'r'aps you'd better," said the woman with a sigh. "My secret has been weighin' heavy on me of late."

"But, my good woman," said Miss Cruikshank, very kindly, for I suppose she thought, as I did, that this was one of those singular cases of madness which sometimes cause innocent people to accuse themselves of undiscovered crimes. "You are not Mrs. Thomas at all. I knew Mrs. Thomas well—and——"

"Of course you knew me, miss," replied the woman. "The last conversation you and I had together was in the kitchen that morning, when Mrs. Dunstan was killed. I remember your saying to me——"

"Fetch the police, Curwen," said Miss Cruikshank peremptorily.

Whereupon the woman broke into a harsh and loud laugh of defiance.

To tell you the truth, I was not a little puzzled. That this scene had been foreseen by my dear lady, and that she had sent me to this house on purpose that I should witness it, I was absolutely convinced. But—here was my dilemma; ought I to warn the police at once or not?

On the whole, I decided that my best plan would undoubtedly be to communicate with Lady Molly first of all, and to await her instructions. So I ran upstairs, scribbled a hasty note to my dear lady, and, in response to Miss Cruikshank's orders, flew out of the house through the area gate, noticing as I did so, that Miss Cruik-

shank was still parleying with the woman on the doorstep.

I sent the note off to Maida Vale by taxicab; then I went back to Eaton Terrace. Miss Cruikshank met me at the front door, and told me that she had tried to detain the woman, pending my return; but that she felt very sorry for the unfortunate creature, who obviously was laboring under a delusion, and she had allowed her to go away.

About an hour later I received a curt note from Lady Molly ordering me to do nothing whatever without her special authorization.

In the course of the day, Miss Cruikshank told me that she had been to the police station and had consulted with the inspector, who said there would be no harm in engaging the pseudo Mrs. Thomas to work at Eaton Terrace, especially as thus she would remain under observation.

Then followed a curious era in Mr. Nicholas Jones's otherwise well-ordered household. We three servants, instead of being called at six as heretofore, were allowed to sleep on until seven. When we came down we were not scolded. On the contrary, we found our work already done.

The charwoman—whoever she was—must have been a very hard-working woman. It was marvellous what she accomplished single-handed before seven A.M., by which time she had invariably gone.

The two maids, of course, were content to let this pleasant state of things go on, but I was devoured with curiosity.

One morning I crept downstairs and went into the kitchen soon after six. I found the pseudo Mrs. Thomas sitting at a very copious breakfast. I noticed that she had on altogether different—though equally shabby and dirty—clothes from those she had worn when she first appeared on the doorstep of 180 Eaton Terrace. Near her plate were three or four golden sovereigns over which she had thrown her grimy hand.

Miss Cruikshank the while was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. At sight of me she jumped up, and with obvious confusion muttered something about "hating to be idle," etc.

That day Miss Cruikshank told me that I did not suit Mrs. Jones, who wished me to leave at the end of my month. In the afternoon I received a little note from my dear lady, telling me to be downstairs by six o'clock the following morning.

I did as I was ordered, of course, and when I came into the kitchen

punctually at six A.M. I found the charwoman sitting at the table with a pile of gold in front of her, which she was counting over with a very grubby finger. She had her back to me, and was saying as I entered:

"I think if you was to give me another fifty quid I'd leave you the rest now. You'd still have the diamonds and the rest of the money."

She spoke to Miss Cruikshank, who was facing me, and who, on seeing me appear, turned as white as a ghost. But she quickly recovered herself, and standing between me and the woman, she said vehemently:

"What do you mean by prying on me like this? Go and pack your boxes and leave the house this instant."

But before I could reply the woman had interposed.

"Don't you fret yourself, miss," she said, placing her grimy hand on Miss Cruikshank's shoulder. "There's the bag of sand in that there corner; we'll knock her down as we did Mrs. Dunstan—eh?"

"Hold your tongue, you lying fool!" said the girl, who now looked like a maddened fury.

"Give me that other fifty quid and I'll hold my tongue," retorted the woman, boldly.

"This creature is mad," said Miss Cruikshank, who had made a vigorous and successful effort to recover herself. "She is under the delusion that not only is she Mrs. Thomas, but that she murdered Mrs. Dunstan——"

"No—no!" interrupted the woman. "I only came back that morning because I recollected that you had left the bag of sand upstairs after you so cleverly did away with Mrs. Dunstan, robbed her of all her money and jewels, and even were sharp enough to imitate her voice when Mrs. Kennett terrified you by speaking to Mrs. Dunstan through the door."

"It is false! You are not Mrs. Thomas. The two maids who are here now, and who were in this house at the time, can swear that you are a liar."

"Let us change clothes now, Miss Cruikshank," said a voice, which sounded almost weirdly in my ear in spite of its familiarity, for I could not locate whence it came, "and see if in a charwoman's dress those two maids would not recognize you."

"Mary," continued the same familiar voice, "help me out of these filthy clothes. Perhaps Miss Cruikshank would like to resume her own part of Mrs. Thomas, the charwoman."

"Liars and impostors—both!" shouted the girl, who was rapidly losing all presence of mind. "I'll send for the police."

"Quite unnecessary," rejoined Lady Molly coolly; "Detective-Inspector Danvers is outside that door."

The girl made a dash for the other door, but I was too quick for her, and held her back, even whilst Lady Molly gave a short, sharp call which brought Danvers on the scene.

I must say that Miss Cruikshank made a bold fight, but Danvers had two of our fellows with him, and arrested her on the warrant for the apprehension of the person known as Mrs. Thomas.

The clothes of the charwoman who had so mysteriously disappeared had been found by Lady Molly at the back of the coal cellar, and she was still dressed in them at the present moment.

No wonder I had not recognized my own dainty lady in the grimy woman who had so successfully played the part of a blackmailer on the murderess of Mrs. Dunstan. She explained to me subsequently that the first inkling that she had had of the horrible truth—namely, that it was Miss Cruikshank who had deliberately planned to murder Mrs. Dunstan by impersonating a charwoman for a while, and thus throwing dust in the eyes of the police—was when she heard of the callous words which the old lady was supposed to have uttered when she was told of Miss Violet's flight from the house in the middle of the night.

"She may have been very angry at the girl's escapade," explained Lady Molly to me, "but she would not have allowed her to starve. Such cruelty was out of all proportion to the offense. Then I looked about me for a stronger motive for the old lady's wrath; and, remembering what she said on New Year's Eve, when Violet fled crying from the room, I came to the conclusion that her anger was not directed against her niece, but against the other girl, and against the man who had transferred his affections from Violet Frostwicke to Miss Cruikshank, and had not only irritated Mrs. Dunstan by this clandestine, double-faced love-making, but had broken the heart of his trusting fiancée.

"No doubt Miss Cruikshank did not know that the will, whereby she was to inherit a thousand pounds, was not signed, and no doubt she and young Athol planned out that cruel murder between them. The charwoman was also a bag of sand which was literally thrown in the eyes of the police."

"But," I objected, "I can't understand how a coldblooded creature like that Miss Cruikshank could have allowed herself to be ter-

rorized and blackmailed. She knew that you could not be Mrs. Thomas, since Mrs. Thomas never existed."

"Yes; but one must reckon a little sometimes with that negligible quantity known as conscience. My appearance as Mrs. Thomas vaguely frightened Miss Cruikshank. She wondered who I was and what I knew. When, three days later, I found the shabby clothes in the coal cellar and appeared dressed in them, she lost her head. She gave me money! From that moment she was done for. Confession was only a matter of time."

And Miss Cruikshank did make full confession. She was recommended to mercy on account of her sex, but she was plucky enough not to implicate David Athol in the recital of her crime.

He has since emigrated to Western Canada.

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FLEEING LADY by Mel D. Ames

I peered closely at the screen on which the two photographs were projected, one superimposed upon the other. The sunlit edges of the stuccoed structures were sharply defined, but the long shadows of the late afternoon sun were still somewhat fuzzy. The fleeing figure of the dead man's alleged lover, being in shadow, was also indistinct.

"I grant you this," I said, "your enlargements of the photograph have identified the woman beyond all doubt, and that *is* the house where the man was shot, but how does that refute her alibi? She claims to have been fifty miles away. How can you possibly prove this photograph was taken at the time of the murder?"

"Inspector." The amateur photographer sighed patiently. He had taken the original photograph quite by chance, and now, a year later, and in my presence, this photochronographic series of fifty exposures at sixty-second intervals. I had stayed to witness, and assist in, the subsequent developing and indexing.

"What you see here," the photographer explained, "is, in effect, a simple sundial, nature's most accurate timepiece. When the shadows in the original photograph align squarely with those in one of the exposures taken today, precisely one year later, we will have established the time factor, irrefutably."

I watched him drop the thirty-first exposure into the projector. The shadow lines in both photographs sprang suddenly together in sharp relief. I had labeled that exposure myself: *5:17 P.M., August 29, 1982*. The gunshot had been heard by reliable witnesses at 5:15.

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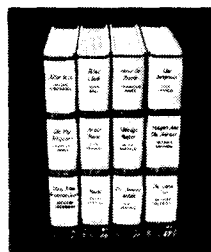
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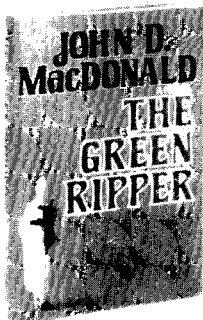
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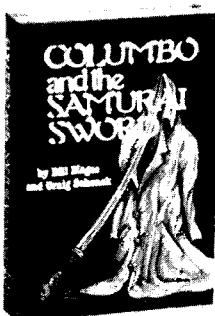
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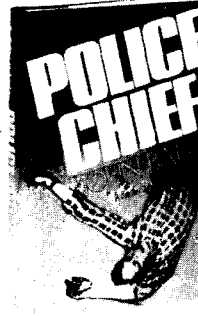
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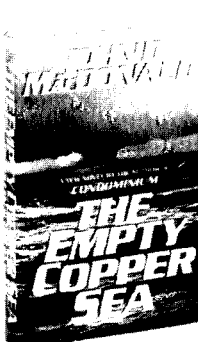
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